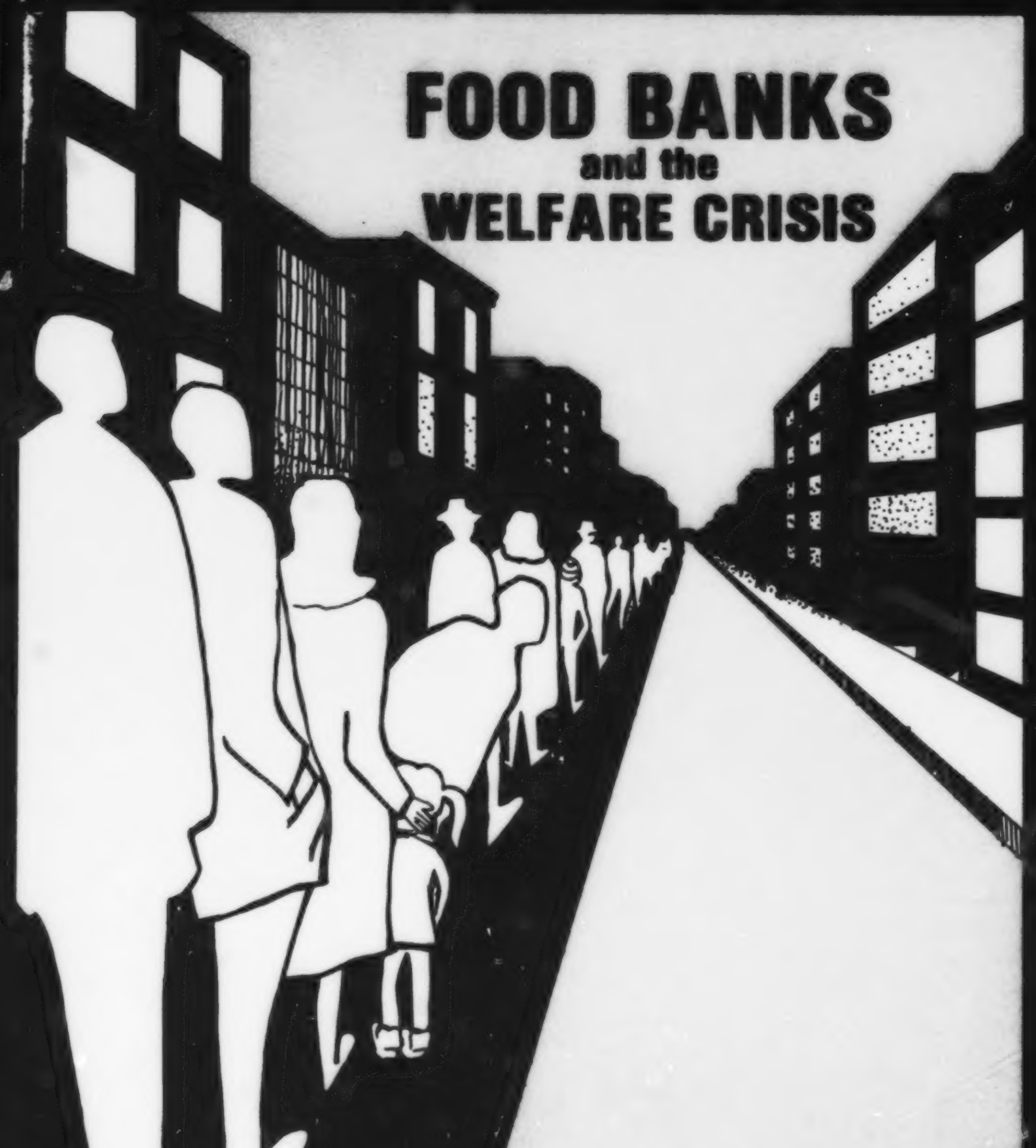
FOOD BANKS
and the
WELFARE CRISIS



Graham Riches

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Food Banks and the Welfare Crisis

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Graham Riches

Canadian Council on Social Development
Ottawa

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To all those standing in the breadlines:
citizens excluded from their society.

"There is a public agreement in Canada that those who cannot work should not be allowed to starve."

Ian Adams, et al.,
The Real Poverty Report, Hurtig, 1971

"Today's society, unlike yesterday's, is capable of feeding its poor. To do otherwise is an error of government."

Fernand Braudel, Historian
World Press Review, March 1985

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INTRODUCTION

Why Study Food Banks?

In recent years, welfare states have come under increasing attack in many countries. As the philosophies and practices of the Thatcher government in the U.K. and the Reagan government in the U.S.A. have taken hold, social security and human services in many countries have felt acutely the impact of such policies. This impact has taken the form of fiscal restraint, public sector and social spending cutbacks, crippling joblessness and increasing support for private market solutions to troublesome social problems.

Canada has seen evidence of such changing priorities since the mid-seventies. At that time Prime Minister Trudeau, in the wake of the 1973 OPEC crisis, rising inflation and increasing interest rates, warned the Canadian population to dampen its demands and generally expect less from the state.[1] In 1976-77 even the NDP government of social democratic Saskatchewan introduced a budget of "responsible restraint."[2] Reports documenting the imposition of cutbacks in publicly-provided services — both federal and provincial — the shifting of responsibility to the voluntary and non-government sector and increases in funding for law and order, have provided much needed evidence.[3] Indeed, the recently released *The New Reality*, which describes and analyzes the impact of the Bennett government's frontal attack on human rights, the public sector and vulnerable people in British Columbia, graphically illustrates the nature of the attack in one particular province.

Those interested in and committed to social security and human services in Canada, whether as policymakers, professionals, women's groups, natives, scholars or the general public, must have recognized a deep irony as events unfolded. Rapidly expanding public knowledge about the Canadian welfare state in the seventies and eighties was evident in a spate of published scholarly works, task force reports and research publications. But these were to little or no avail.[4] Indeed, for those trying to throw light on the state of the public safety net, the contradiction was sharpest. It seemed that, as more attention was paid to the inadequacies of unemployment insurance and social assistance, the situation for recipients of these benefits worsened.

Of course, it could be argued that these publications simply reflected the deteriorating social assistance and unemployment insurance systems. As caseloads rose and cutbacks were applied — resulting in tighter eligibility rules, more demeaning distinctions between the deserving and undeserving and lower benefits — the reports picked up and commented upon the situation. However, federal and provincial authorities paid little or no attention to the findings of such reputable social welfare organizations as the Canadian Council on Social Development, the National Council of Welfare, the Senate Committee, and provincial Social Planning Councils. The critiques of the Catholic bishops and the advocacy-minded National Anti-Poverty Organization and its provincial counterparts also fell on deaf ears.

Clearly, we should not be naive enough to think that governments, which are themselves promoting fiscal restraint and socially conservative policies and struggling to survive in a climate hostile to social spending, will respond favourably to the progressive promptings of vested interest pressure groups. The fact remains, though, that this neglect has helped recreate the conditions of the thirties, during which millions of Canadians depended upon ad hoc charitable relief. Since 1981, food banks have been operating in Canada. What is more, they have become engaged in feeding (directly and indirectly) hundreds of thousands of Canadian citizens for whom the public safety net has proved inadequate.

The view presented here is that the rise of the food banks provides concrete evidence of the collapse of social assistance and unemployment insurance. In other words, the safety net has broken down at the very point in a depressed economy where it should be providing its strongest support to the most vulnerable. It can, of course, be argued that the safety net never existed in the first place, so it could hardly collapse. This argument states that since World War II full employment and economic growth — regarded as the twin pillars of western welfare states — were never fully realized in Canada. Moreover, the commitment to an adequate social minimum never existed. These are arguments which need to be addressed, but the fact remains that, in 1985, for several days each month, social assistance benefits do not exist for hundreds of thousands of Canadians. For them and their children the safety net is no more than an abstract idea. It has collapsed.

My interest in the rise of food banks in Canada was sparked during a discussion with a senior social welfare official in Saskatchewan following the provincial government's "welfare reform" policies introduced in April 1984.[5] The government had been under attack for its key proposal which would cut social assistance benefits to single unemployed employable people, redirect the money saved (some $9 million) to short-term job creation and skills training programmes, and then cut such people off benefits if they refused to accept programmes offered. The benefit reductions, particularly for payment of rents, were substantial. The point we discussed was the adequacy of benefits prior to the cuts. The official maintained that such allowances were adequate in Saskatchewan and indeed the province led the other provinces in social assistance benefits. In any case, poverty lines were themselves too high.

However, what could not be explained was that a food bank had started in Regina in May 1983; that it was doing brisk business; that many of its users were on social assistance; and that some government financial aid workers were reportedly referring their clients to its doors. In other words, how could the public welfare system be defended as adequate at the same time that a food bank was responding to a rapidly growing demand for emergency assistance? This obviously warranted deeper investigation.

Canada Assistance Plan:

The issue of the food banks posed some difficult questions not only for provincial governments which are constitutionally responsible for providing social assistance, but also for the Government of Canada. The Department of National Health and Welfare (Health and Welfare Canada) is responsible to the government and Parliament for administering the *Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) Act, 1966*. CAP provides federal cost-sharing on a 50%/50% basis to provincial social assistance and welfare programmes. It was designed, according to Guest, as:

> . . . a scheme to consolidate all the federal-provincial programmes based on tests of means or needs into a single, comprehensive programme of benefits that would meet financial need regardless of cause. The programme had two subsidiary goals — to provide services which would help people retain or achieve independence, and to improve the standards of public welfare.[6]

The preamble to CAP and the legislative provisions refer to the need to provide adequate assistance.[7] They also stipulate a number of conditions that the provinces must fulfill to receive cost-shared dollars: provinces must provide basic assistance to any person in need regardless of cause; determine need on the basis of a needs test that takes into account an individual's budgetary requirements (food, shelter, etc.) and the income and resources available to meet them; not require a period of residence in the province as a condition of eligibility for assistance; and provide by law a formal appeals procedure which gives a right of appeal to a social assistance applicant or recipient. Participation must be voluntary. Provincial accounting must also be available for federal inspection.

The underlying premise of these conditions is that the provinces receive federal dollars only upon their providing an adequate system of public welfare, ensuring a developmental approach and safeguarding national standards. How, then, can the rise of food banks be explained? While poverty line studies, and the work of Guest in particular, have engaged the question of inadequate assistance rates, the role and the responsibility of the federal government to ensure that the provinces meet the cost-sharing conditions has not been examined. One problem is that the federal government does not have an operational definition of "adequacy". It is therefore hard to know on what basis it would assess whether social assistance benefits were too high or too low.

Because the federal government continues to provide cost-shared dollars, it can only be concluded that the federal government assumes that provincial social assistance rates are adequate, despite much evidence to the contrary. It is also evident that little pressure has been exerted at the federal level to enforce national standards in social welfare or the social right to benefit. Despite its legislative mandate and power of the purse, the federal government has willingly ceded the constitutional right to set the level of benefits to the provinces. However, the issue is not as clear-cut as the federal government might like.

Critical questions:

The existence of food banks in Canada since 1981 raises critical questions about the operation of the public safety net at both the provincial and federal level. While federal and provincial governments may wish to confine the debate about the "social safety net" to pensions and family and child benefits,[8] food banks suggest that the issues confronting the social security system in Canada are broader and deeper. These issues extend particularly to social assistance programmes and to unemployment insurance and the adequacy of the benefits they provide.

The issues raised by food banks engage all three levels of government and the non-government sector. Food banks pose critical questions about waste in advanced capitalist society; about how Canadians think about poverty and its creation; about child hunger in the midst of superficial affluence; about women in poverty; about public health and inadequate nutrition; about public and private rights and responsibilities; about the rise of voluntarism, the role of the church, and the significance of altruism;

and about a public safety net in which the holes are so wide that minimal protection is denied hundreds of thousands of Canadians. They raise important issues about the constitutional division of powers and about whose responsibility it is to ensure that Canadian citizens receive adequate incomes from wages or income support. They also show how Canada and the provinces ignore international treaties which oblige both levels of government to guarantee the rights of all Canadians to adequate food, clothing and shelter.

It is hoped that this study of the rise of food banks will help us look with fresh eyes at these social welfare issues, and at the contradictions which they raise. It is also hoped this study will provoke new thinking about what is to be done. It is important to recognize that a critique of the food banks is not simply a defence of the public safety net as it existed in 1981. If anything is to be gained from this critique, it is to open up discussion about a new agenda for social security in Canada now and into the future. We need to ask if our old "casualty treatment approach" to social welfare is really what we want and what our citizens deserve.

How the Research Was Conducted

Research for this study was conducted in a number of ways. Visits were made to most of the larger food banks in western Canadian provinces and in Ontario and Quebec. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were held with the directors of these food banks and, where possible, discussions were held with representatives of participating churches and non-government organizations (NGO's). In some instances conversations were also held with social welfare academics, government officials, members of labour organizations and political parties, and members of anti-poverty organizations. The sample was not chosen randomly but a "key informant" approach was used to yield insights.

Telephone interviews were conducted with food bank and food store operators in British Columbia and New Brunswick and also with staff of voluntary organizations in Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island.

A literature search revealed little of assistance regarding food banks in Canada. This was hardly surprising given their brief existence. In the U.S.A., where the food banks started in 1966, it was almost as difficult to track down any substantive research. However, the annual reports, information kits and brochures of the food banks in Canada and the U.S.A. were valuable source materials as were occasional feasibility studies and advocacy reports produced by the food banks themselves. Press clippings were also useful. Literature on the social welfare system itself was much more extensive.

Information was gathered and questions and methods of analysis were refined further through public meetings, consultations with food bank board members, and conferences and seminars conducted in schools of social work and government. At the same time interviews were conducted on provincial and national television and radio programmes. To some extent this posed a dilemma as the research was then ongoing. However, food banks were seen as a significant social policy issue and it was important to contribute to the public debate. That debate was picked up and is continued in this book.

Organization of the Book

The book is organized into four parts, each comprising a number of sections which in turn explore the rise of the food banks, the collapse of the safety net, the view that voluntarism is the way ahead and options for social security in Canada beyond the limits of today's public safety net. Within this framework, the rise of the food banks is used as a case study to analyze the contradictions in Canada's systems of public relief.

Notes

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Edmonton, September 1983; *Burdens and Benefits: Social Assistance in Saskatchewan in the 1980's*, Social Administration Research Unit, University of Regina, May 1983; *Report of the Manitoba Task Force on Social Assistance*, September 1983.

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6. Guest, D., *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada*, UBC Press, 1980, pp. 155-156.
7. *Canada Assistance Plan Act, 1966-67*, c. 45, s. 1.
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I

RISE OF THE FOOD BANKS

This chapter explores the rise of the food banks in Canada: their origins, how they describe themselves, who was involved in starting them and why. It looks at the influences on their development, considers different types of food banks and describes how they are organized and administered. It also examines who gives the food and why, who is eating it and why people are begging for food in Canada in the 1980's. The crisis of hunger in the country will then be assessed.

A. Origins of Food Banks in Canada

Feeding Canada's poor has become a major preoccupation for the voluntary sector of churches and NGO's in the past three years. The most visible sign of this activity has been the establishment of food banks in all provinces with the exception of Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. Their heaviest concentration is in Western Canada and particularly British Columbia. Indeed, one reporter in Alberta wrote that food banks could be seen as one of that province's fastest growing industries.

1. Feeding programmes: Before the food banks

In examining the rise of food banks in Canada in recent years, it is important to understand both how they differ from, and contribute to, a broad range of existing feeding programmes. Soup kitchens run by missions and churches, publicly and privately financed school meal programmes, nutrition projects, meals on wheels services and emergency food vouchers and bed and breakfast facilities offered by bodies such as the Salvation Army, have for decades formed part of the residual stopgap services of the Canadian welfare state. There is no official estimate of the number of such services operating in Canada, but it can be safely concluded that they offer a significant, if ad hoc, range of services. One United States estimate claims there are more than 12,000 food providers in that country including food pantries, cupboards and closets.[1] Based on the number of known agencies receiving food through food banks in eight Canadian cities in 1984, there are at least 400 such services operating in the provinces. This figure is likely a gross underestimate. It excludes agencies which do not receive food from food banks, such as the Salvation Army, and does not account systematically for the numerous churches involved in giving food.

The important point is that food banks have become established both despite, and because of, this vast range of supplementary, and largely voluntary, emergency food services. The reasons are easy to discern.

In its national report on Canada's food system published in 1980, one year before the first food bank was established in Edmonton, the People's Food Commission commented on the need for emergency food. Inadequate social assistance and OAS benefits were cited as the main reason. Moreover, supporting testimony came from all parts of the country, rich and poor provinces alike. In Halifax, the Rev. Cal Pretty told the Commission that the number of people coming to him for emergency food relief was noticeably increasing. He went on to say, "I see three to four hundred people a year in my office who have run out of money three or four days before their welfare cheques come . . . Of the thirty-three who came over the Easter weekend, I was only able to help seven of them. It is pretty darn hard inside to turn these people away."[2]

In other words, voluntary relief was itself unable to cope. While some food banks became engaged in providing food directly to hungry people, others started in response to pressures being felt by the churches and NGO's. They, like the minister in Halifax, were having a hard time obtaining sufficient food for their clients and making ends meet. Community meetings in Regina, Edmonton and Toronto before the establishment of food banks confirm this point. Indeed, the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto was started explicitly to help the smaller agencies meet the growing demands for food. Such food banks saw their primary task as coordinating the supply of food to front line agencies, hostels and churches where the demand for food was expressed. Other food banks emphasized the collection of wasted food from the food industry, but it is clear that the demand for a more efficient emergency food service to help existing feeding programmes was a critical factor.

2. Growth and spread of food banks

Between 1981 — when the first food bank was started in Edmonton — and the end of 1984, 75 organizations calling themselves food banks were set up in Canada. In 1985, 19 new food banks were established, bringing the total to 94. (See Table 1).

Food banks developed initially in Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan, followed by central Canada and then the Maritimes. The food banks in Edmonton, Vancouver, Calgary and Regina opened their doors between January, 1981, and May, 1983, with the majority of the other food banks in British Columbia and Alberta also established during that time. It was not until 1984 that food banks in Kitchener-Waterloo, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Fredericton and Campbelton appeared on the scene. It should, however, be noted that there was a failed attempt to start a food bank in Metro Toronto in 1982 and another food bank in Hamilton-Wentworth collapsed in 1984. Food banks were also started in Saskatoon and Prince Albert in 1984, and others were set up in Halifax and Winnipeg in early 1985.

One other fact stands out clearly. The majority of food banks are in Western Canada, and most of them are in British Columbia. When we come to examine the exploding social assistance and unemployment insurance caseloads in the West between 1981 and 1984, coupled with stringent social spending cutbacks by provincial governments, the reasons for this dramatic growth will be apparent. At the same time we should also note that food banks were still being set up in 1985.

Table 1: Food Banks Reported by Province as of December 1985.

	Year First Food Bank Opened Doors[1]	Numbers of Food banks 1984	Numbers of Food Banks 1985[2]
Newfoundland	—	—	—
P.E.I.	—	—	—
Nova Scotia	1985	2	4
New Brunswick	1984	2	6
Quebec	1984	2	2
Ontario	1984	4	9
Manitoba	1985	1	1
Saskatchewan	1983	5	5
Alberta	1981	12	14
British Columbia	1982	47	53
Canada		75	94

1. Based on available information.
2. Canadian Food Bank Update Survey, 1986.

Source: Food bank reports

3. What is a food bank?

While some food banks are engaged in the direct provision of food to hungry people, others in the food bank movement see themselves quite differently. In trying to sort out what a food bank is, and does, it is helpful to start with a definition and then note the exceptions. This will give us a common starting point.

The major food banks in Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Saskatoon, Ottawa and Toronto would probably agree that a food bank is:

> . . . a centralized warehouse or clearing house registered as a non-profit organization for the purpose of collecting, storing and distributing surplus food (donated/shared), free of charge, to front line agencies which provide supplementary food and meals to the hungry.[3]

This definition stresses the notion of surplus food in the food production and retailing system. United States estimates suggest that each year twenty per cent of America's food supply goes to waste. This amounts to 53 million tons of food wasted or $24 billion worth of food destroyed.[4] Food bank organizers in Canada quote the United States percentages when discussing waste in the Canadian food industry. In fact, this emphasis on collecting surplus or wasted food points to one of the key debates within the food bank movement. As one food bank worker in Ontario put it, "Food banks are not feeding programmes. They are a means to redistribute the 20 per cent of surplus food. They are ways for people to become involved, to participate and to contribute."

Others would argue that it is difficult to distinguish between surplus food and waste and the needs of hungry people.

Whether to use the term "surplus" or "wasted" food is also a matter of some importance. "Waste" has a harsher connotation than "surplus." Surplus suggests to the public that this is food which cannot be used by the food industry, while waste leaves the impression that the private sector is inefficient. Yet, even the term "surplus" has its problems when one considers that the cost of the food dumped, or given away, by the supermarkets and stores has already been reflected in the prices paid by the consumer. In other words, the food given away is in fact only surplus to the requirements of profit, but is wasted from the point of view of the consumer or the hungry. If prices were lowered, or subsidized, no doubt most of the food would be bought. Doubtless for the food banks, the idea of "surplus" food is preferable to "waste," as it leaves the public impression of a charitable and community-spirited food industry. For the food banks, which are, of course, dependent on the food industry for a large part of their food, this is a crucial consideration.

The definition of food banks also says much about the relationship between surplus food and the hungry. Food banks intend to make food which would otherwise be dumped available to organizations which can put it to good use. This is done either through bulk food deliveries to such agencies as shelters for battered women, transient hostels, half-way housing for ex-psychiatric patients or through providing emergency food hampers delivered to social agencies. The emphasis is on the coordinating or clearing-house function of the food bank, not the direct feeding of the hungry.

Much is also made of the involvement of many different people in collecting and distributing food. The idea of "neighbour helping neighbour" is very strong. One report on food banking in Edmonton puts it this way:

> A tailor-made hamper involves at least the following people: the donors of the food, whether corporate or individual; the volunteers who unload and sort it; the staff person or volunteer at a member church or agency who interviews someone in need; the volunteer at the Food Bank who receives requests for hampers; the volunteer who assembles the hamper, the person who delivers the hamper to either the member service or directly to the recipient; and ultimately, the person or family who receives and consumes the hamper. Such a system involves many people who want to be involved, and it works well.[5]

While the report notes that there are obvious limits to the capacity of the food bank, food banks would also agree that it is not their role to "substitute for welfare or other subsidized help available to those in need."[6] In other words, food banks are there as a supplement, not as long term, direct feeding programmes. Sharing, conservation and voluntarism are the ideals.[7] The coordinating, warehouse approach is their major contribution.

It is, however, clear that the definition provided earlier only serves as a starting point for discussion. As soon as it is presented, one starts noting the exceptions.

First, leaving aside for a moment the debate as to whether "surplus" or "waste" is more appropriate in describing the food donated by the food industry, not all food received by the food banks is surplus. Some food banks (in Greater Vancouver, Edmonton and Calgary) do in fact buy some of their food at discount prices. In Vancouver, buying food forms a large part of the operation. In Edmonton, food is purchased as a last resort to provide nutritionally-balanced hampers.

Second, not all food banks operate centralized warehouses. The Kitchener-Waterloo food bank in Ontario uses a number of small pantries, and Moisson Montreal Harvest makes direct deliveries from hotels and restaurants to hostels, missions and other social agencies.

Third, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank distributes its food bags directly to people through line-ups. Other food banks in British Columbia also permit people to apply directly to the food bank, as do those operating in New Brunswick. Food banks in British Columbia have also developed into food stores.

In other words, in thinking and talking about food banks (or, rather, organizations calling themselves food banks), it is important not to stereotype them. Before looking more closely at the different types of food banks in Canada, it will be helpful to consider such questions as, who started food banks and why? And what were the influences contributing to their development?

4. Major influences

From speaking with food bank directors across the country, it is clear that the major institutions influencing the start-up of food banks were NGO's, churches, labour and the corporate sector. The media in general has also supported the food banks. The U.S. food banks in operation since the mid-sixties played a critical role in terms of ideas and organizational approaches. Provincial and municipal governments also played their part in the early days of the Canadian food banks. Clearly, the rise of Canadian food banks between 1981 and 1984 took place during a period of heavy and, in some regions, rapidly-increasing unemployment. Poverty was again on the increase and demands made of the public safety net could not, it seemed, be met.

Coordinating surplus food:

These demands were commented on in different ways by those involved in starting the food banks, including Marian Centre, a Catholic religious community in downtown Regina. As part of its service to the community, the seven members of the house provided a free lunch to between 70 and 150 men six days each week. In 1982, they found it was becoming impossible to meet the growing demand for food and to handle the donations. They were also concerned about the increasing numbers of young people and women who needed food.

At the same time, other social agencies and churches in Regina were increasingly running their own "food banks" and negotiating privately with stores. Staff and volunteers were so busy rounding up food that they had no time to work with their clients. The Marian Centre acted, and a meeting held at City Hall was attended by 150 individuals and representatives of social agencies in the city. This pattern was repeated in a number of cities across Canada. In many ways, then, food banks resulted from attempts to bring together the different recovery efforts of various organizations and to achieve some economies of scale.

Most food bank directors found it difficult to distinguish the primary motivation as being surplus food in the food industry or seeing to the needs of hungry people. After running a food bank for some time, Ed Bloos, Director of the Regina Food Bank, observed that he was at first appalled by the wastage of food he saw and was then overwhelmed by the enormity of the need.

The need for food:

On balance, it was apparently the need rather than the surplus that drove the food bank organizers. The inadequacy of welfare benefits was acknowledged even by an Ontario food bank board member, who felt it was appropriate for public and private agencies to be working together on the problem of hunger. As he put it, "no one wants to fudge over the issue of inadequate income maintenance for housing and food." Another food bank director on Vancouver Island stated it more starkly. She knew the need was real, because she had been driving hungry people into Victoria to the Mustard Seed Food Bank — people who could not afford the bus fare to make the trip themselves.

What most touched those who got the food banks going was a combination of indignation about wasted food and of horror born of personal experience about the numbers of jobless people with little or no income who were going hungry. Sylvia Russell, the Director of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank, put the case most bluntly when she said that she hoped her food bank "would put the human face of hunger on the front pages of the newspaper."

N.G.O.'s and churches:

Voluntary organizations and churches rallied to the cause, though in cities such as Toronto and Regina, some of the more established missions including the Salvation Army did not appear to be wholeheartedly behind the new food bank movement. In Regina, the Salvation Army supported the food bank initially and then withdrew from the participating agencies. In Toronto, while the Daily Bread Food Bank does cooperate with the larger missions, it has focussed its attention on serving the smaller agencies. More to the point, churches of all religious denominations have participated in the start-up of food banks, although as we shall see later, with divisions of opinion and even criticism of the food banks.

Certainly, the Catholic Church appears to have been a key influence in a number of food banks, though the approach on the whole was ecumenical, typified by the inter-faith sponsorship of the food bank in Calgary. Representatives of the major Protestant churches, the Catholic churches, and smaller fundamentalist sects such as the Seventh Day Adventists, have all been active in organizing food banks.

U.S. influences:

These people brought not only spiritual motivation to the task of setting up food banks but also provided links to the food bank movement in the United States. It was to the United States that the food bank organizers in the larger Canadian cities looked. A major influence appears to have been the St. Mary's Food Bank in Phoenix, Arizona, which is regarded as the founder of American food banks.[8] It was started in the mid-sixties by Bob McCarty, a Catholic deacon, and John Van Hengel, who were working for a St. Vincent de Paul dining room. They passed on excess food to other churches and, with the help of the St. Mary's downtown parish, established a warehouse. By 1975, the U.S. government funded an effort to spread the idea to other cities. Second Harvest was born, and McCarty went to work for it. By 1983, 61 regional food banks comprised the system's backbone,[9] with Second Harvest acting as a food broker. McCarty is now back working with the St. Mary's Food Bank.

In the early days of the Edmonton, Calgary and Regina food banks, Bob McCarty visited the centres to advise on setting up the organizations. Elsewhere, the organizers of the Montreal food bank and the one in Toronto visited their counterparts in New York and Detroit respectively. Others were inspired to start organizing after having seen programmes on food banks on United States television, and some corresponded with United States food banks. Indeed, the director of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank once worked as a volunteer at a United States food bank.

While certain Canadian food bank directors are quick to point out that advice from their United States colleagues is not always to be followed (e.g., "start big"; "introduce tax write-offs"), the models south of the border are emulated to some extent. It is also of interest that John Van Hengel, the dean of U.S. food banks as well as a representative from Second Harvest, attended the first national conference of the Canadian food banks in Edmonton in May 1985. One of the purposes of this convention was to create a national association of food banks in Canada. In other words, U.S. influence on the Canadian food bank movement is ever-present and has been orchestrated to some extent through religious and Catholic networks. We will not address the broader question of why food banks are necessary in the U.S. which has basic income support and food stamp programmes.

Labour and business:

Labour and the corporate sector have also been a source of influence and support for food banks in Canada. Labour's support has been expressed through funding and donations and most directly through the establishment of union- backed Unemployment Action Centres. In British

Columbia and to some extent in Alberta, the respective provincial Federations of Labour have provided support for food banks operating through the Unemployment Action Centres. Interestingly, in some communities food stores were preferred to food banks, and in Quesnel, British Columbia, the food bank developed into a store.

The backing of the corporate sector has also been evident in funding but more usually in the form of food, free warehousing, the provision of walk-in refrigerators and so on. Obviously, this support was and remains crucial to the success of the food banks. Without ready access to surplus food in particular, it is difficult to see how the food banks would remain active.

The media:

Support from local media, particularly television and radio, has also been important and, in one prairie city, both the CBC and the private television station have taken their turn in promoting the food banks. Again, while such a promotion is obviously important to attract and keep public support, some interesting questions are posed about the role of the media. If, as they acknowledge in their support of the food bank drives,[10] hunger is a critical social issue, why would they not promote more adequate financial assistance benefits? Or would that be deemed to be a political and therefore controversial act? Such action throws an interesting light, not only on their perception of the problem, but also on how they want the public to see the issue. Food banks clearly welcome the support of the media but, in accepting it, it is likely that certain critical questions as to the underlying reasons for the problem go begging.

Government:

Governments also provide initial support and encouragement to various food banks. The Saskatchewan Minister of Social Services, Gordon Dirks, officiated at the opening of the Regina Food Bank. Provincial government funding supported the start-up of two New Brunswick food banks. The Calgary Interfaith Food Bank likewise received a $30,000 start-up grant but was not supported in a second application. In Toronto, a consultant's study looking into the need for a food bank was jointly funded by the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services and the City of Toronto. In Ottawa, the Regional Municipality also supported a similar study. In Saskatoon, Regina, Vancouver and Edmonton, as elsewhere, city councils helped with small grants or leased warehouse accommodation at knock-down rents. In Prince Albert, the food bank even received sixteen acres of land from the City Council. Government support was therefore forthcoming for the food banks as they set up shop. Perhaps this is hardly surprising, given their rising support for voluntarism and the increasing privatization of social services occurring across the country. Federal government grants have also indirectly supported research staff at one food bank in Nova Scotia and in New Brunswick the provincial government supports food banks on a long term basis through its financial aid to the Community Volunteer Association.

By the early 1980's, the time was ripe for food banking in Canada. A rapidly-deteriorating economy was placing huge demands on front-line social service agencies and churches as more and more people started looking for food; concerned workers in these community organizations, driven in part by the knowledge that food was being wasted and in part by a desire to help feed people in a quick and practical way, began organizing in local communities, union offices, church meeting rooms and city halls.

Unemployment was rising and poverty was again on the increase. The National Council of Welfare reports that by 1983, 4.3 million Canadians — one in six — lived on low incomes, i.e. below the Statistics Canada poverty line.[11] The report notes that this estimate represents a substantial increase of 448,000 men, women and children over 1982. Between 1980 and 1983 the number of low income families rose steadily from 745,000 to 967,000. By 1983, 35% of unattached men and 46% of unattached women were living on low incomes. The proportions are higher for single elderly Canadians. And in the same time period the numbers of children living in low income families had increased by a third to 1.2 million or one in two of all Canadian children. There is little wonder the pressures on emergency aid sources were growing.

Given the cutbacks being applied to social spending by all levels of government, church workers, volunteers, labour organizers and representatives of the unemployed knew that they could not expect much help from the public purse. Some quite actively opposed the idea of receiving government funds. Ironically, of course, the impetus of government restraint was precisely to promote voluntarism and the kind of response which the food banks were aiming for. With the major support of the NGO's, the churches, labour and the corporate sector, the food bank idea caught on. Help was also received from the United States food bank movement, and the local media promoted food bank drives. Governments also assisted in minor but significant ways. Food banks, it could be said, had tapped two enormous problems — waste and hunger — in Canadian society. They also demonstrated how effective they were in developing a practical response. The types of food banks that were created in Canada between 1981 and 1984 were a product of these influences and of the people (directors, board members, staff, volunteers) who took it upon themselves to make sure that their neighbours were not going hungry. What kinds of food banks did they create and why? And what explains the similarities and differences among them?

Notes

1. Correspondence, Food Research Action Centre, 8.1.85.
2. People's Food Commission, *The Land of Milk and Money*. National Report, 1980, p. 15.
3. Derived from brochures of food bank organizations in Canada.
4. St. Mary's Food Bank Brochure, Phoenix, Arizona, 1983.
5. Edmonton Food Bank, *Hunger in Our City: A Question of Responsibility*, Edmonton, January 1985, p. 2.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 3.
8. McCarthy, Tim. "Happy Birthday! St. Mary's," Information sheet, undated.
9. *The Economist*, "Waste not, want not," November 19, 1983.
10. *The Leader-Post*, Regina, February 23, 1985.
11. National Council of Welfare, *1985 Poverty Lines*, Ottawa, March 1985, p. 4.

B. Models of Food Banks

We can classify food banks in Canada into two broad models or types. Based on such factors as their purposes, origins, sponsorship, participating agencies, funding, activities and so on, we can speak of the voluntary/charitable model and the labour/union model. Such a classification is not entirely satisfactory, as within each type there are important differences and between the types considerable overlaps in functions. However, the division does help to throw some light on how different food banks see themselves and each other and it provides some clues to their differing roles and functions in the Canadian welfare system. It is also important to look more closely at their distinguishing features, as the term "food bank" and how it is used by the media, in particular, may generate some false ideas.

1. The voluntary/charitable model

Food banks falling within the voluntary/charitable model are non-profit registered charities having their roots in the church and non-government organization sector.

As can be seen from Table 2, food banks of this type have developed in most provincial capital cities (9), Ottawa, and other major cities (6) of Canada. As well, they can be found in a number of smaller cities (34) and help to serve surrounding rural districts. Eighty per cent of these food banks are located in Western Canada, with the majority in British Columbia and Alberta. The first food bank was established in Edmonton in 1981, followed by food banks in British Columbia in 1982 and Regina in 1983. Food banks in Central and Eastern Canada became established more recently in 1984. The West certainly led the East in the establishment of food banks, though whether the West would welcome such an accolade is debatable.

Before looking at some of the differences between these food banks, let us consider those factors they have in common. In terms of their organizing principles, they would all be committed to sharing, conservation and voluntarism. They would emphasize the salvaging of wasted food but, at the same time, would stress the importance of feeding the hungry. Some would see themselves existing only while "the emergency" lasted, while those who stressed wasted food would see themselves having a longer future.

Table 2: Food Banks by Type and Province as of December 1984.

	VOLUNTARY/CHARITABLE				LABOUR/UNION			
	Capital Cities	Large Urban Centres	Small Cities	Sub-Total	UAC Food Banks	Stores	Sub-Total	TOTAL
Newfoundland	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
P.E.I.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Nova Scotia	1	—	1	2	—	—	—	2
New Brunswick	1	—	1	2	—	—	—	2
Quebec	1	1	—	2	—	—	—	2
Ontario	2*	1	1	4	—	—	—	4
Manitoba	1	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Saskatchewan	1	1	3	5	—	—	—	5
Alberta	1	1	8	10	2	—	2	12
British Columbia	1	1	21	23	18	6	24	47
Canada	9	5	35	49	20	6	26	75

*Includes Ottawa.

Source: Food bank Reports

Organizational support:

With their roots and membership largely in the churches and voluntary agencies, food banks also hold strongly to the ethic of neighbour helping neighbour. This ethic was best expressed by one food bank board member, who said that the people of his city "should look after the needy without having to ask government for handouts." While this attitude would not necessarily be shared by all food bank members, some of whom are concerned with raising with government its legal, moral and public responsibilities for basic assistance, the very act of creating volunteer food banks means that their participants see them as a legitimate area for voluntary (non-government) activity.

The fact that so many of the larger food banks looked to the United States for help and support is indicative of the strength of this volunteer ethic and its application to meeting a basic human need: hunger. This ethic is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that all provinces in Canada, with the support of the federal government, have provincial social assistance programmes designed to meet basic social needs. Such assistance is an accepted and legislated responsibility of the state.

The board membership of food banks reflects their sponsorship by the churches and voluntary agencies. While boards of some food banks (e.g., Greater Vancouver, Regina and Montreal) in general comprise individuals with no particular affiliation to agencies using the food bank, others combine individuals and representatives of member/participating agencies. On all boards, we find not only the interests of church and non-government organizations represented but also business and, in some cases, labour. Only in very rare cases (e.g., Vancouver) are food bank users granted board status. In this way, food banks conform to a traditional model of the non-government organization in that they draw their volunteer (board) support from the established middle class.

That the voluntary/charitable food banks are largely creatures of the social agencies whose needs they serve is borne out when we look at their participating member organizations. It is difficult to give a precise figure for the number of participating agencies, as not all food banks have comparable records and the numbers keep changing. However, if we look at voluntary organizations and churches participating as members in eleven food banks in Greater Vancouver, Langford (British Columbia); Edmonton, Calgary (Alberta); Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert (Saskatchewan); Toronto, Kitchener-Waterloo, Ottawa (Ontario) and Montreal (Quebec), a picture of the kind of participation emerges. Of the 291 member agencies in 1984, 62 per cent (181) were non-government organizations; 19 per cent (55) were churches or parishes; and, 12 per cent (35) were church-based organizations.[1]

While the overall distribution of member agencies may not accurately reflect their participation, what is of most interest is the wide range of organizations involved in the food bank movement. Within the non-government sector are the organizations which might be expected, such as missions, crisis centres, welfare rights organizations and unemployment action centres. Also included are single parent and women's hostels, native organizations and family service programmes. More surprisingly, we also find organizations working with immigrant families, correction and probation services, and health and housing programmes. In other words, the food banks' food or emergency feeding programmes are not simply going to agencies dealing with people's immediate crises; they also work with longer-term social service organizations such as hostels and institutions which might be expected to have sufficient funds for the food they provide as part of their service. Food banks provide both an emergency crisis service, through distributing food hampers, and a longer term bulk supply programme. The extent to which these services only supplement existing diets or substitute for inadequate welfare benefits and NGO funding is a question which will be considered later.

Churches and parishes, as well as church-based organizations such as missions and soup kitchens, are also an important source of support and referral for the food banks. Many requests for food come via the parish priest or downtown chaplain, and the parishes act as sources of donations and as distribution centres. The influence of church members is felt on the boards of food banks in all provinces.

Funding:

Food banks also show marked similarities in their funding. Most, if not all, receive donations from individuals, corporations and private foundations, service clubs, churches and schools. Labour also contributes, as do certain United Way funds. Food banks in Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary and Ottawa belong to their respective United Ways and have found this beneficial. Funding drives are also held. What was, however, more surprising was that many food banks also received some form of government financial support. Funding from regional and municipal authorities has ranged from help with a feasibility study (Toronto); start-up grant (Saskatoon); short-term operating grant (Ottawa); rental allowances or space in lieu of rent (Regina, Vancouver and Edmonton) and 16 acres of land to the food bank in Prince Albert. At least four food banks have received operational grants (either direct or indirect) or funds for a feasibility study from provincial governments in Saskatchewan, Alberta, Ontario and New Brunswick. The federal government, through its Canada Works programme, has supported staff salaries of food bank employees in Vancouver, Hamilton and Montreal.

Again, the emerging pattern is that of the traditional voluntary organization which relies on a variety of funding sources. Some food banks, like those in Regina and Kitchener-Waterloo, do not receive any direct government funding. The Regina Food Bank prefers to remain voluntary and not to depend on public funding.

Staff and volunteers:

The paid men and women who staff the food banks are dedicated, hard working and community-spirited. Some of the directors or coordinators, as they are sometimes called, have been with their respective food banks since the beginning and were part of the initial creative impulse and vision. They have performed all of the jobs necessary to make a food bank run well. Not only did they know how to persuade the supermarket manager to part with his surplus food, but they also knew how to handle the media, take calls from teenage mothers lacking food for their children, worry about agencies who did not understand the system, devise ways of keeping the records and handle the politics of their developing agencies. They were not highly paid and, in some cases, did not know where the next few months' salary was coming from. Some started working on the food banks on faith alone, as they felt bound to act on the issue of wasted food and impelled by the need to respond to the hungry. Religious, humanitarian and practical commitments have kept many of them going.

Clearly, the food banks require more than one paid director to keep them afloat. Of the food banks visited, the number of paid staff (full-time/part-time) varied between one (Kitchener-Waterloo) and nine (Vancouver).[2] However, it is essentially the volunteers who guarantee that the food is collected, stored, packaged and distributed. Although there was some comment that it was difficult to attract permanent volunteers, without them the food banks would not survive. Edmonton reported 70 to 100 volunteers in any one week who carried out virtually all functions. Calgary had 250 volunteers, and Vancouver 80 per week. Figures for smaller food banks clearly would be lower, but the significance of their contributions remained.

The volunteers represented all walks of life and in particular the agencies and churches participating in the food banks. One aspect, however, of voluntarism at the food bank is noteworthy. At a certain point, users or potential users of the food bank provided their labour free (as volunteers) as food sorters and packers in the warehouses. For example, in Langford, British Columbia, some of these volunteers were single parents who needed food themselves. In Vancouver, many of the volunteers helping each week were themselves recipients of food aid. In Regina, many of the volunteers were men and women working off fines imposed by the courts. They had chosen the Community Fine Option instead of spending time in jail and had been referred to the food bank by the John Howard Society. Twenty-five per cent of those volunteering in Calgary also came from the Fine Option programme. Saskatoon had men volunteering their time through the Urban Camp programme.

Doubtless such volunteers may have preferred to be doing something rather than nothing; to be making a contribution; or to find some acceptable way to stay out of jail. But it is a cruel touch of irony that the poor and jobless themselves have to volunteer to bail out an economic system that has failed them.

Food collection and distribution:

There were other differences among the voluntary/charitable food banks, differences which reflect the varying ways these voluntary agency directors interpreted their missions and the tasks agreed to by their boards.

They differed in two principal ways: in how they collect and distribute food; and in how they interpret their mission, particularly public education and advocacy.

Food banks collect and distribute food in four broad ways. These reflect in part the stages of particular food banks' development, in part the organizational preferences of member organizations and in part the vision of the founders, particularly if they remain in the chief executive position. The four ways are: *the centralized warehouse approach; the inter-agency cooperative food buying arrangement; the direct food supplier to social agency method;* and *the direct feeding programme.*

The *centralized warehouse approach* (in Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Ottawa) is the collection, storage and sorting of surplus food and its free distribution to member agencies (either in bulk or in food hampers) for dispersal to needy people. The food banks thereby provide a coordinating function for frontline agencies and are only indirectly involved in giving food. Individuals do not themselves apply to the food bank but have referrals made on their behalf by the agencies. Such food banks would regard themselves as the true example of a food bank. By this definition, only one food bank could exist in a large community. For example, in Edmonton, the food bank's area of operation is within 30 miles of Edmonton city limits. Also, according to the logic of this definition, agencies which actually distribute emergency groceries to the hungry, and receive 50 to 100 per cent of their food from the food bank, would be called food outlets, cupboards or pantries. They may see themselves as food banks but are not really so.[3]

However, agencies which adopt different arrangements also call themselves food banks. The food bank in the Waterloo Region, based in Kitchener-Waterloo, adopts a *cooperative food buying arrangement* with its member agencies. It collects the food and stores it in various pantries around town. However, each of the five agencies receiving the food (either bulk or emergency) pays a small fee for each "meal" received. In this way, the funds of the food bank are maintained. The point is that the food is not distributed freely as in other food banks.

The third approach, which reflects the stage of development of this particular food bank, is the *direct food supplier to social agency method* adopted by Moisson Montreal Harvest. Essentially, staff and volunteers of the food bank, located in a Montreal church basement, drive their vans to hotels, shops, hospitals, bakeries and restaurants where they collect prepared food and then take it directly to hostels and other organizations which can use it. They use five gallon buckets to transport the food. Apparently, some smaller agencies in Montreal have now become dependent on Montreal Harvest, and the staff talk of funding a warehouse.

The last method is used by the Greater Vancouver Food Bank, many smaller ones in British Columbia and, it would seem, at Restigouche and Fredericton in New Brunswick. Here the method is the *direct feeding programme*. In Vancouver, people actually start to line up at 1:00 a.m. each Wednesday at 84 distribution centres to receive their bag of food. The more common practice is for those wishing food to visit the food bank during the week, make their order and receive their food. Certainly in Vancouver, the philosophy of the Food Bank Director, Sylvia Russell, is to keep in touch with the people. It helps to keep the food bank honest and "makes sure the human face of hunger appears on the front pages of the newspaper." In the politically-divisive context of British Columbia, the food bank line-ups have certainly become visible reminders of the personal tragedies of tens of thousands of British Columbians.

Advocacy role:

Even food banks whose auspices are those of the traditional voluntary organization differ in their approaches to government, public education and advocacy. Put simply, some food banks seek to avoid open political debate about their work and, more significantly, the reasons for their work. Others believe that they should be playing a stronger role regarding public education and advocacy but are ambivalent about courses of action.

In many ways, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank and the Edmonton Food Bank have chosen to adopt an open advocacy stance. Vancouver gets its message across through its open relationship with the media. The Edmonton Food Bank has chosen to collaborate with participating social agencies in the city, with food bank users and, until they withdrew, with representatives of Alberta Social Services and Community Health in writing a report on the inadequacy of the province's social allowance system. This report to the citizens of Edmonton, the product of many months of activity, was released on February 20, 1985. Its major point was that the policies and practices of Alberta Social Services and Community

Health (i.e., inadequate social allowance policies) have created undue demands on the Edmonton Food Bank to the point where it has become a substitute for, not a supplement to, "welfare." In other words, the Food Bank chose to act openly in the public arena. Interestingly, the chairperson of the Regina Food Bank, at the opening of a television-sponsored food bank drive, was quoted in the Regina Leader-Post as saying that "provincial cuts from last spring are also being felt by the needy, as about 6000 city residents use the food bank's services each month."[4]

However, other food banks have chosen to keep a lower profile, either working behind the scenes or simply concentrating on the task of collecting food and distributing to those who need it. In Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Union of Unemployed Workers has sought from the beginning to widen the participation and advocacy stance of the Saskatoon Food Bank. However, it has met with little success. Advocacy is seen as hostile to the political party in power and upsetting to corporate sponsors and the good will of thousands of food donors. While this assessment may be right the point is made, of course, that food banking as a social and economic activity cannot escape the politics of its environment.

2. The labour/union model

This model of food bank organization describes the 20 food banks (18 in British Columbia, two in Alberta) and six food stores also in British Columbia run through Unemployment Action Centres (U.A.C.). As Table 2 shows, such food banks comprise one-third of those operating in Canada. While less is generally known about these food banks, it is possible to view them as based on somewhat different principles and practices than those of the voluntary/charitable type.

These food banks were started largely with union support as a response to the massive layoffs in the lumber and mining industry created by the British Columbia government in the early 1980's. They are supported in British Columbia through the British Columbia Federation of Labour, and the staff are employed through the Federation, mainly through federal grants. Not only is there much more opportunity for the users of the food banks to act as volunteers, but the U.A.C.'s also work on advocacy questions. In other words, it is not just the request for food which is addressed, but help is also provided with unemployment insurance problems, social allowance appeals, rental questions, and a whole range of welfare and legal rights issues.

Given their origin, it is not difficult to appreciate that the U.A.C. food banks place less emphasis on the notion of conserving or salvaging wasted food and more on getting food to people who need it. Speaking for the New

Westminster Food Bank, Ralph McMillan also said that if people are referred to the food bank from the Ministry of Human Resources with no grant, then a U.A.C. worker will take up this matter with the social worker concerned.

This particular food bank, started in December, 1982, runs a large operation. By December, 1984, it was giving out 1,700 bags of food each month. In earlier days it would run out of food, but not since the labour movement got behind it. The food, most of which is bought, is distributed twice a week, and people can come every second week.

The crucial difference between the voluntary/charity and labour/union food banks is that the latter stress education about rights. Kim Zander of the Vancouver Unemployment Action Centre, one of the organizations behind Solidarity and the Lower Mainland Budget Coalition, does not see food banks as a solution. She says they are a necessary evil. The U.A.C.'s efforts should concentrate on the right to assistance, adequate minimum wage and education. Sometimes, though, these issues become intertwined and, in addition to advocacy, other forms of support are needed.

In 1984, the People's Commission for Social and Economic Alternatives was established by the Solidarity Coalition to prepare a public report on the impact of the B.C. government's restraint and cutback policies on the people of the province and to examine alternatives. It gave the following account of how the New Westminster U.A.C. grappled with the inadequacy of B.C.'s relief system:

> I would like to share with the Commission a couple of cases which point very clearly to a hard and callous attitude on behalf of the present system. The first of these experiences deals with two young men. Denied assistance from the Ministry of Human Resources (MHR) because of their age and, unable to find employment, both of them faced charges of theft. They had each stolen food because they were hungry. They were advised by the MHR to return to their parental homes. One of these two young men would not talk about his reasons for being unable to go home, becoming very defensive when questioned. The second told us that his stepfather beat and kicked him, even setting dogs on him. These young men were three and four months respectively away from being of legal age to qualify for GAIN benefits.
>
> Our U.A.C. has, as one of its projects, a food bank. We could not do anything about the theft charges, but a kind citizen allowed the boys to live in the basement very cheaply and then found enough jobs to pay the very reasonable rent. The U.A.C., through the food bank, was able to feed them until they became old enough to get assistance

from MHR. These boys repaid us by volunteering at the food bank. Both were hard and willing workers.[5]

Foodstores:

The U.A.C.'s have also helped with the development of food stores, at least one of which, in Quesnell, British Columbia, has developed from a food bank. Stores contacted in Quesnell, Nelson, Duncan and Kamloops all stress similar principles and approaches. When mills closed down, and unemployment exploded, the unions got behind the U.A.C.'s and the food stores.

The stores emphasize participation and thereby work to maintain the self-esteem of those using emergency food services. As one Duncan Food Store worker said: "The idea is to help people on U.I.C. help themselves. It is to give people self-pride." The stores also aim to give people choice in the food they obtain, rather than keeping them dependent on a hamper or bag which may contain many items which they do not care for. Some also work on advocacy questions and will support people in their battles for adequate benefits. The food store in Quesnell also stocks clothes, books and toys; it runs a budgeting course and assists with an odd job squad. If people do perform jobs in the community, they get paid for their labour. All of this is very different from the work of, say, the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto or the Edmonton Food Bank.

Depending on the food store, recipients have to be registered as unemployed, waiting for unemployment insurance or social allowance, receiving social allowance or on a fixed income. They also have to belong to the food store and, in that sense, it operates like a co-op or club. While the Kamloops food store is open five days a week, the others open only for limited times.

Food is purchased wholesale, a small markup (one to five per cent) is made, and the profits are used to restock. Quesnell, which operates a food bank as well, also uses part of its profits to restock the food bank. The operation is fairly straightforward. In Duncan, staff members discuss what they need to buy on Mondays, collect the food on Tuesdays, shelve it on Wednesday, sell it and then pay the merchants. The food consists only of basic items such as soups, potatoes, hamburgers, sausages, wieners, stewed beef, ham and flour. Pancake mix was the most exotic item. In March 1984 the Victoria U.A.C. food store was selling five pounds of rice for $2.17; five kilograms of flour for $2.75 and four kilograms of white sugar for $3.49.[6]

The staff of the U.A.C. food stores are paid through the British Columbia Federation of Labour and Statute 38. Volunteers also provide a major source of labour. The food stores are an interesting and important variant in the food bank movement and they provide a model which certainly deserves closer inspection.

This review of food banks operating in Canada between 1981 and 1984 has shown that there are two distinct organizational models and a variety of approaches for running food banks. The similarities reflect a basic concern to feed the hungry, but the differences suggest opposing and perhaps competing views as to whether the major issue is salvaging waste food or feeding hungry people. Within the voluntary/charitable food banks, this question is one of emphasis; but for the labour/union food banks and stores, it is clear that hunger is the pressing issue. Public education and advocacy are also matters confronting the food banks, and there are interesting examples of how both types of food bank work on this question. The one certain point is that Canadian food banks do not conform to one particular stereotype.

Michael Harrington, socialist critic and author, made similar observations about food lines in the U.S. He described people using the soup kitchens as beaten, defeated and resigned and wishing not to be labelled as poor. Others collecting food from a steel workers' local seemed social and light-hearted. The differences Harrington saw reflect the charitable auspices of one kind of organization and the self-help approach of the others.[7] In Canada the variety of approaches to food bank organizing reflect regional differences, political divisions, religious preferences, individual choices and levels of funding. It is also impossible to state categorically whether harvesting surplus food or feeding hungry people is their major goal. What is evident is that there is a tension between these two objectives, at least for the voluntary charitable food banks, which is unlikely ever to be satisfactorily resolved. Charity and self-help can also be seen to be at odds. Voluntarism responds to the volunteer's altruism and need to participate but often excludes from participation those who have already been made powerless: the hungry and unemployed.

Notes

1. Food bank records and agency member lists viewed by the author.
2. The Greater Vancouver Food Bank employed a Director, Project Director, Bookkeeper and six Canada Work employees.
3. Gerrard Kennedy, Director of the Edmonton Food Bank supplied these helpful distinctions. In fact, of course, if this useful typology was followed, the number of operating food banks shown to exist would dramatically decline.
4. *The Leader-Post*, Regina, "Food Bank Appeals for Aid." 23.2.85.

5. Solidarity Coalition of British Columbia, *The People's Report: A Social and Economic Alternative for BC*, Marquardt, M., et al., March, 1985, p. 50.
6. *Vancouver Sun*, "Hard Times Mar Holiday Haven," 3.3.84.
7. Harrington, M., *The New American Poverty*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984, p. 44-46.

C. Collecting, Distributing and Rationing the Food

Not only is it impossible for food banks to avoid the political implications of their actions but, like any welfare agency, they have to make decisions about who gets what. They must collect food, store it, package it and then make sure it reaches the people who need it. Supply frequently does not match the demand. Who gives and why? Is there competition for donated food? Who asks for food and why? What is the scale of the demand? Given the limited supply of food, how do the banks cope with these difficult rationing decisions? Are nutritional needs addressed, and do food banks ever have to turn people away? In other words, how well do food banks match supply and demand in the market place of wasted food and empty stomachs?

1. Supply and demand

a) Who gives and why?

This question is of prime importance to all food bank board and staff members and to volunteers. For the people needing food, it is obviously a key issue.

There are three major sources of food: the food industry, churches and social agencies, and individuals. All partners in the food business have contributed to food banks since 1981: producers such as farmers and market gardeners; wholesalers of produce such as fish, vegetables, milk and bread, canned food and frozen products; and retailers such as the large supermarket chains; small stores; and even the restaurant, hotel and catering industry, including McDonald's. Shopping malls are often used for food drives with collection containers placed in stores. Some food banks, perhaps more than might be expected, purchase some of their food, but most rely on the corporate sources for their major supply. For example, the Edmonton Food Bank receives 85 per cent of its food from commercial food stores.

During the start-up of food banks in the larger cities, there was concern about competition for food between the new food banks and feeding programmes which had existed for years and obviously had a traditional source of supply. Indeed, not all feeding programmes have joined the food banks. The Salvation Army in some cities has chosen to keep its own programme going and its own food sources active. This decision does not appear to have been a problem for food banks, which exist partly to cut down on unnecessary competition and to develop a better coordinated system for collecting food. In Toronto, in fact, the Salvation Army shared its list of fifty food companies with the Daily Bread Food Bank. In Montreal, when the food bank knows that certain food stores donate directly to particular agencies, the food bank will not approach them. This question of competition may be more of a problem during the start-up phase and in the larger cities.

Social agencies, such as churches, schools, service clubs and service organizations, also contribute food and money. The media often backs local food drives and, in Ottawa and Edmonton, the Roughrider and Eskimo football organizations have supported canned food campaigns. Fans are all asked to bring one can or more to a football game, a method which has proved successful. In Ontario, junior hockey has also supported such ventures. Individuals are another source of food, time and money, and children are encouraged to contribute.

According to food bank directors, developing and maintaining a strong relationship with people at all levels in the food industry is crucial to the success of a food bank. The contacts are made in different ways: through approaches to company chairmen, to food store managers, to produce managers, to restaurant owners, to individual farmers and so on.

One food bank director's secret of working with the supermarkets is to get to know the produce manager, whom he sees as the person controlling what actually happens to surplus food. Contacts with such personnel may be made formally by approaching the supermarket itself, through churches where both are members, or through the manager hearing about the work of the food bank through a service club meeting. This particular food bank director also believes that the key to obtaining a steady supply of food is to make sure that the person driving the pick-up van has a pleasant manner, keeps to schedule and does not create more work for the staff of the supermarket or store when collecting the food.

The food arrives in a variety of ways. Individuals will drive in with a bag of groceries, farmers will deliver a truck of grain to the local mill to be passed on to the food bank after processing, a truckload of frozen fish from the north will suddenly arrive or another food bank with food surplus to its requirements may send it to the next food bank down the road. This practice is much more common in the United States, but is catching on in Canada. As the national food bank association grows, this type of food banking and interprovincial cooperation can be expected.

Types of food received:

There are no limits to the kind of food a food bank will receive, unless it lacks refrigeration or space. Most food from corporate donors comprises day-old foods or food nearing the due date for eating. The food banks find it easier to store canned and packaged food and must move the perishable supplies quickly, particularly if they have no cold storage facilities. They tend to receive slow-moving stock, damaged goods or perishable foods, some of which has to be thrown out. When they can, food banks like to stock canned foods for the winter, when the supply of fresh food becomes more difficult. In fact, following the drought in southern Saskatchewan in the summer of 1984, the food bank had virtually no potatoes, zucchinis or pumpkins. A year earlier, they had so many that they did not know where to store them. Some food banks also try to stock special food items. Doctors will telephone food banks to ask if they have special diet food for infants and sick children.

Reasons for giving food:

There are a number of reasons why people donate food and money, and of course their time, to the food banks. For the food companies, it seems, there are a mixture of motives. For some, it is seen as good business: it is cheaper to give away surplus food than to pay to have it dumped. It is good for the corporate image, and if tax receipts are given, then it makes even better business sense. For others, it is an altruistic gesture born of a sense of justice, and of "there, but for the grace of God, go I." Food bank directors, who are good barometers of donors' motivations, generally see mixed motives for giving in the food industry. Don Leier, a Saskatoon business man and a member of that city's food bank, probably summed up the view of the corporate donors when he said that the food distributors

> . . . were very supportive and that they are the lifeblood of the food bank because they want to see that this [surplus] food is properly used. People don't want to see waste. Secondly, I think it's an ongoing philosophy in this community — I'm sure in others — that we can do a lot of things together by using what we have. And that certainly came through. They said yes we have this, now if you can get a distribution point set up and a collection point set up, this is certainly a good first step.[1]

The individual farmer, church member or child is doubtless donating out of a sense of community spirit and well-meaning charity. Older people, who remember the Depression, may have stood in breadlines themselves. They have a strong sense of empathy. As one food bank coodinator put it: "In Canada, there is an understanding about people's need to survive and our interdependence."

While some undoubtedly give out of a sense of guilt, others are donating because they understand the nature of the crisis. They know what it means to be out of work, and that being jobless is not the fault of individuals. They also realize there are children to be cared for. One Lutheran Church in Regina asks members of its congregation to bring a can of food to church each week. The act of weekly giving is intended partly to contribute food, but perhaps more significantly, to be a symbolic reminder to members that the problem of hunger in Canadian society is one which they as Christians have to address.

Amounts donated:

Certainly, in the past three years, the food banks have been successful in tapping private giving and public generosity. While it is not really possible to show the amounts given overall for the Canadian food banks, it is possible to indicate the recorded contributions to selected food banks of different sizes and to show the growth over time.[2]

During the first four months of its operation between October, 1984, and January, 1985, the Prince Albert Food Bank (a small operation) saw its food supplies grow from 5,593 pounds to 8,364 pounds, an increase of 50 per cent. In Regina (a medium-sized food bank), if we compare food received for December, 1983, and 1984, the amount grew from 76,151 pounds to 135,000 pounds for those months only. This represented an increase of 77 per cent. The Edmonton Food Bank's increase (for a large organization) for the first nine months of 1983, over 1984, was even more staggering. It more than doubled (103 per cent) from 482,380 pounds to 998,732 pounds.

If these increases are an indication of what is happening in other food banks of similar size, and there is no reason to believe it is not, then the food banks are having little difficulty obtaining food and persuading the public of their case. However, as will be seen, the supply does not always meet the demand.

b) The scale of the demand

How many people are using the food banks is a hard question to answer with any certainty. Data on users is not kept in any systematic way by all food banks. This makes aggregation almost impossible and interprovincial comparisons difficult. However, there are two primary sources for statistics: the food banks themselves and member agencies.[3] If we use the same technique of examining the records of those food banks which do keep reliable data, break down the data by province and then make some generalizations, it is possible to get some picture of overall demand.

In British Columbia, figures for a number of food banks tell the following story. The Greater Vancouver Food Bank fed 186,973 people in 1984 based on an approximate weekly handout of 2,500 bags. On occasion, such as the week after the Billy Graham rally at British Columbia Place, this swelled to 3,000 bags. In December, 1984, the New Westminster Food Bank was giving out 1,700 bags per week, and the Langford Food Bank on Vancouver Island estimates it is feeding 1,000 people a month. The smaller food stores also experience strong demand. The Duncan Food Store sees about 200 individuals a month, representing over 600 people in families. The Kamloops Food Store likewise estimates that, in the last three months of 1984, it served about 260 families or over 800 people. For a two week period in February, 1984, the U.A.C. food banks put the number receiving food at 34,800 people.

In the two largest cities of Alberta, Edmonton and Calgary, the numbers are also high. In 1984, 45,000 different people or the equivalent of 114,177 people in families received bulk and emergency food in Edmonton, while in Calgary, 43,837 people received food for periods of one to three weeks.

In Saskatchewan, the Regina Food Bank distributed food to just under 50,000 people for periods of three to five days in 1984. The Saskatoon Food Bank, which only became operational in the fall of that year, fed 7,844 people between November 1984 and January 1985; and the Prince Albert Food Bank, in a similar period, assisted 1,549 individuals.

The Ontario data is less exact. The Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank estimates it feeds about ten thousand people a month; the Kitchener-Waterloo food bank gives out between 400 and 500 hampers a month, and in the short time since Provisions Ottawa has been in existence, it has given food to 17 emergency and regular agencies which provide 100,000 meals per month for the needy.

Moisson Montreal Harvest in Quebec estimated it had delivered over 14,000 servings of food in the first four months of its operation in 1984. 1984 figures for food banks in the Maritimes are not known.

Taken at face value, these figures are staggering, though it is important to remember that between 40 and 60 per cent of those receiving food are returning more than once. In Vancouver, it was estimated that 90 per cent of those in the line-ups had been there at least once before. This qualification might lead one to believe that the demand is not that high. However, three points should be noted. The figures presented here refer to less than half of all reported food banks. Demand exceeds supply. Food banks do turn people away. They also restrict the numbers of requests that can be made and give out smaller quantities of food if they think their supply will run out. In addition bulk food distribution to hostels and institutions masks the real number of people eating "wasted" food.

Moreover, food banks reported large increases in demand between 1981 and 1984. Even more remarkable as Table 3 shows, between 1984 and 1985 the major Canadian food banks experienced an average 51 per cent increase in demand. If these figures and growth rates are typical, then the implications for the safety net and for the problems facing hungry people in Canada are ominous.

Table 3: Growth in Food Bank Usage, Selected Canadian Food Banks, 1984 and 1985.

	1984	1985	% Growth
Greater Vancouver	186,973	263,890	41
Edmonton [1]	114,177	148,962	30
Calgary	43,837	56,644	29
Regina	49,119	85,845	75
Daily Bread [2]	10,000	18,000	80
Average increase			51

1. Person equivalents
2. Estimate

Source: Canadian food bank records

Food banks, without exception, report their heaviest demand towards the end of each month. This is particularly noticeable in those food banks which distribute their food on a referral basis through agencies. Demand peaks when the "welfare" cheques have run out. The money has been used to pay fixed costs like the rent and utilities. Food costs, which in the words of the economists are elastic, get stretched and finally snap when there is nothing left to pay them. For many, then, food bank supplies have become a regular part of monthly budgeting. Captain Gordon Bobbit, administrator of the Salvation Army's Metro Toronto Family Services, notes that many turning to emergency food banks are so poor they are now making the handouts part of their monthly budget plans.[4] It is also true, of course, that food banks will generate a certain demand. The level of this demand is is not clear, but evidence suggests that it has not yet peaked.

c) Who asks and why?

Hunger is largely a family matter in Canada, if those using the food banks are a reliable guide. Although data on food bank use is subject to many qualifications, it is nevertheless possible to provide reasonably reliable information. One excellent report by the Edmonton Food Bank and its member agencies draws on the findings of three surveys conducted in January, June and October/November of 1984.[5] It looks not only at who is using the food bank but also why. One small review of the Regina Welfare Rights Centre records on food bank referrals for 12 months in 1983/84 supports the findings of the Edmonton surveys. Another survey conducted by social work students at the University of Regina also helps determine who is coming to the food banks.[6] Indeed, data compiled by other food banks present a number of snapshots in which the main features are remarkably similar.

Family and child hunger:

The Edmonton surveys reveal that several traditionally vulnerable groups use the Food Bank. What is most alarming is that 50 per cent of individuals fed are children and 28 per cent are single parents. During 1984, the Regina Food Bank reported that 60 per cent of its users were dependents, the majority children. This percentage is supported by the social work student research cited above which systematically examined the records of the Regina Food Bank between August and December 1984. While the Greater Vancouver Food Bank reports that 35 per cent of users were children (ages 0–18), the Langford, British Columbia food bank gives a figure of 60 per cent and Calgary 50 per cent. Data from other food banks are not available, but what is evident is a serious problem of family and child hunger. The majority of people using food banks are those with family responsibilities. Women are clearly major consumers. In Regina, the largest proportion of families coming to the food bank are those with three to six members.

The fact that single parents comprise such a large group is not surprising. Fifty per cent of single mothers in Canada live on incomes as low as one-half of the poverty line.[7] Perhaps more alarming are the reports from food banks (Regina, Vancouver, Edmonton) that they receive requests from doctors for special formula food for babies and children. Money has simply run out and, despite the fact that Canada is meant to have a universal health care system, mothers are unable to feed their children special diets. In fact, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank is so concerned about the needs of single parents that it has started a special programme for them.

The single unemployed:

Single unemployed people are also a significant group, but the stereotype of food banks responding largely to the needs of this group does not seem to be borne out by the existing data. However, a note of warning should be added. Many food banks supply bulk food to hostels, women's shelters, friendship centres, luncheon clubs, transition houses and other institutions where single people and those cut off from their families are living. In other words, the proportion of single people, who are homeless, may be understated if one simply looks at the emergency food distribution. Among those seeking food in Toronto are refugees who have fled El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

The new poor:

Some, like Sylvia Russell of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank, speak of the new poor as the major consumers of the food banks' supplies. Eating breakfast at the St. Andrew's Cathedral soup kitchen in Victoria, BC, are an out-of-work teacher and a chartered accountant, as well as university graduates, truck drivers, construction workers and forest workers.[8] Gus Long, a former president of the Federated Anti-Poverty Groups of BC, thinks "middle-class hunger" has arrived. Those turning to food banks are " . . . people who have never before had to worry about the basic necessities of life. They have always been able to make their way — pay their bills and keep their heads above water — but now they can't."[9]

Certainly, individuals who have appeared on television or radio shows have acknowledged that they never expected to find themselves begging for food in Canada in the 1980's. Marie Crittenden, interviewed on the CBC "Fifth Estate" programme (26.2.85), talked about what it was like to find you did not belong to the class you thought you did.

> Even when I was going to college most people in my position thought that they were middle class, or upper middle class. Well, we're not really. We're part of the masses. We're part of the poor. I'm part of the poor anyways. And I had a time adjusting to that, to the fact that I'm just your average poorly paid person who needs a hand now and then.[10]

Given the nature of the economic recession, some would say "depression," it is hardly surprising that those accustomed to regular well-paid jobs now find themselves in the breadlines. There is evidence, that people who never expected to be "on welfare" are having to make the trip to the food bank more than once. People feel afraid and degraded about having to apply. However one views the situation, it is clearly alarming that so many people are becoming dependent upon such food supplies.

Incomes of food bank users:

Why is this happening? There are a number of explanations, but to get a handle on the immediate reason, one must ask, what is the primary source of income of food bank users? The surveys and the food bank statistics tell us that the majority of users are, in fact, recipients of social assistance. Again, the Edmonton survey puts their number at between 53 and 71 per cent of all food bank users depending on where they live in the city. In 1984, this amounted to 8,400 people a month in Edmonton who needed food aid in addition to their social allowance.[11] The Regina Welfare Rights Centre data shows the number to be between 75 and 93 per cent, though this is likely overstated for food bank users as a whole, given the fact that the Regina Welfare Rights Centre works largely with those on social assistance. The Greater Vancouver Food Bank reports 75 per cent of those in the line-ups are on social assistance. Other food banks speak of similar high percentages.

It is hardly surprising that this is the case, given that those on "welfare" comprise the "poorest of the poor" in Canada. Only those who have no incomes because they have been cut off "welfare," or are waiting for unemployment insurance, are likely worse off. Those on unemployment insurance are the next largest group of recipients. Other groups include those with no income and some earning low wages.

It is apparent that the major reason why people are using food banks is the inadequacy of social assistance and unemployment insurance. When we look more closely at why people say they apply to food banks, the primary causes are inadequacy of the benefits themselves, lack of eligibility for certain benefits and administrative delays in receiving cheques.

While interprovincial comparisons are difficult, as no cross-provincial study has been done, these conclusions are supported by the Edmonton surveys and the Regina review. Lack of income to buy food was cited by 33 per cent of the Edmonton social allowance respondents as being the reason for applying to the food bank. Other major costs cited included the need to purchase clothing (26 per cent); transportation (9.2 per cent); moving costs (7 per cent) and bills (7 per cent). This was after the rent had been paid. In Regina, inadequate social assistance benefits accounted for 60 per cent of the reasons given.

Cutbacks in social assistance, particularly rental allowance, have been commented upon as leading to high usage of food banks in a number of provinces. The graph from the Edmonton survey demonstrates "a strong correlation between the timing of the major policy changes in 1983 and the tremendous rise in Food Bank demand." The most significant change was shelter allowance cuts in July, 1983. Other provinces experienced similar cutbacks, including Saskatchewan where the Welfare Reforms of May 1984 cuts rentals for single unemployed employable people and reduced earning exemptions; and British Columbia where GAIN cuts announced in 1983 froze welfare rates, reduced benefits to some people under 25 years of age, developed stricter eligibility criteria and limited or cut earnings exemptions.[12] Demand on the food banks has certainly grown since these policies were introduced. Families are major consumers, as are women, single parents and children. Social assistance recipients are simply running out of money.

2. How much and for whom?

Despite the fact that the food received and distributed by food banks is growing, so is the demand. How, then, do food banks which do not charge for the food they distribute (i.e., use price to balance supply and demand) make sure their donated food is fairly rationed? Can they guarantee that no one gets left out? How important is the often-raised issue of abuse? Can they satisfactorily address questions of quality and nutrition? These are important questions for the food banks in light of their commitments to making sure that surplus food is not wasted and that the hungry of Canada are fed.

How much food people receive and how often they receive it depend on the distribution system used. It is important to know if the food bank supplies bulk or emergency food; and if it distributes its food through social agencies on a referral basis, or if it gives food directly to people who need it. Another important consideration is the schedule of the food bank (i.e., open once a week or every day).

Bulk food:

Most of the voluntary/charitable food banks make bulk food available to missions, soup kitchens, school meal programmes, hostels, and so on. In this case, it is not really possible to know how much food people are actually receiving. My own experience serving lunch one day at the Marian Centre in Regina showed me that no one was turned away and that the men received all they could eat and drink. The general rule of thumb for such agencies would appear to be that the amount of food prepared will depend on the daily supply, and this will be rationed accordingly. Also, most agencies have a fairly good idea of the demand.

For example, the By Ourselves organization in Regina, which is a self-help group of people who have been mentally ill, receive a weekly bulk food order from the food bank. Workers at By Ourselves, themselves members of the self-help group, draw up the weekly order and phone it into the food bank, which then delivers the supplies. The food is then shared out according to each person's original request. In this way, people get what they want or need, and the distribution is handled efficiently. No doubt, most agencies receiving bulk orders also handle the supply and demand question this effectively, though it is likely they do not always get what they need, given the food banks have only whatever food is surplus at a given time.

Emergency food:

Emergency food distribution seems to generate more difficult problems. Making up individual food boxes or bags is not an easy task. If the food banks use a line-up system for distribution and only hands out a set number of food bags once a week, then it is likely to run into problems. In fact, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank does have to turn people away because it has not prepared sufficient food bags. Demand frequently exceeds the 2,500 bags of food prepared. Those for whom there is nothing are labelled "turnaways." This problem seems to be more a function of the distribution system than the amount of food available.

Other food banks which operate through social agencies and are open during the week respond to growing demand by reducing the amount of food in the food box. For example, when the Regina Food Bank opened in May, 1983, it gave out five pounds of food per person per day (to meet a Department of Health standard). By March 1985 it was handing out only 2.5 pounds of food per person. No one was turned away, people simply got less. Clearly, the distribution system permits this adjustment.

Rationing criteria, practical and moral dilemmas:

Food banks do, however, have a number of rationing criteria designed to ensure that food does not run out and that people in need are helped. In general, food banks insist that people are referred through existing agencies and that they are in need. This means having little or no food at home. Data from one referral agency's records in Regina showed that 30 per cent of those applying had no food and 70 per cent had very little. Very little meant not enough to last until the next day. There is no uniform application of the rules, but they include applicants giving their names and addresses, numbers of dependents and primary source of income. Cards are made up and stamped each time a person receives food. Food banks provide sufficient food for up to one week, though some limit requests for food to only once or twice a month.

The most common attitude about people receiving food seems to be that if someone is hungry enough to ask, then he or she needs it and the red tape should be cut to a minimum. At the same time, there is concern about abuse and ensuring that all coming to the food banks actually need the food. This is not an easy question to settle given the strong public attitude fanned by politicians such as Grace McCarthy, British Columbia's former Minister of Human Resources, who said that people in line-ups are buying skis and having $17 hairdos.[13] Food bank operators treat the issue with caution, because they realize that if this perceived abuse is publicly accepted, then food supplies might start to decline. Abuse is regarded by most food banks as a minimal problem, though it is an issue some food banks have had to confront.

For example, in Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Union of Unemployed Workers was struck from the list of the food bank member agencies when the food bank learned that the Union was not screening food applicants through its referrals. For SUUW the issue was " . . . that any kind of screening or means test or procedure whereby people are made to justify their need for food is the same as making people kneel down and beg, cap in hand, for the right to live . . . . Welfare benefits are too low to allow people to buy sufficient food for themselves and their children."[14]

The food bank sees the issue differently. Leier, a member of the board says, "Number one, and statistics bear this out, abuse of systems is minimal, and number two, maybe we should have a little bit of sorrow." He also called for balance and said, "We definitely have asked for the screening process by need so we don't build up a position where the food bank, instead of assisting people in a crisis, ends up becoming another agency that becomes a permanent crutch."[15] In other words, food banks have to face some pretty irreconcilable attitudes in handing out food.

Nutritional quality:

Of more concern than abuse is the whole problem of the quality and nutritional value of the food received. While it is difficult to put a dollar value on the emergency food bags or hampers, as these vary between food banks and according to whatever is available, it is possible to place the question in perspective.

At one end of the scale would appear to be the food boxes prepared by the Calgary Interfaith Food Bank. They provide a list of 50 food and household items (soap, toilet paper) and the amount received for one week by different-sized families. The food included items from each major food group and would provide a nutritious diet for one week. However, not all food banks command the resources of the one in Calgary.

A typical food bag handed out in Vancouver is valued at between $20 and $25. It contains two cans of soup and one each of meat or fish, vegetables, pork and beans, and fruit. Also included are two to three pounds of potatoes, a bag of rice (three cups), one loaf of bread, carrots, onion, half a dozen eggs, miscellaneous items and baby food if available. As one of the food bank workers said: "You wouldn't starve for one week on this ration, but you would be inactive." Most food banks probably hover somewhere between Calgary and Vancouver in the amounts they distribute, though this is difficult to substantiate.

The quality of food received thus depends on what is available, though it should be noted that food banks store food, particularly cans, for the winter months. Perishable foods such as vegetables provide more of a problem, particularly if there is insufficient cold storage, because they have to be moved as quickly as possible. Of course, such food is sorted in the warehouses, and inedible, overripe or bad food will be thrown away. However, some does end up in the hampers and has to be thrown out by users. Others may complain from time to time that the food box does not contain what they were expecting. It is a problem about which food banks can do little short of following the route of the food stores in British Columbia and allowing people to choose their own food.

The nutritional question remains a real one. Food banks attempt to provide balanced hampers but cannot always succeed. Nutritional guides are used by staff and volunteers in making up the orders, and special attention will be given to the food groups, the ages of the applicants and any special dietary needs. Nutrition experts have helped some food bank staff with these matters. Also, for native people who prefer wild meat and fish, their preferences are taken into account. Food banks have also tried to help people with budgeting or money management and cooking. However, the problem of nutrition remains a difficult one though it is not a major issue to the extent that the food received only supplements people's main diets. The problem is that for many people, this food has become "the full pantry."

Notes

1. *Star Phoenix*, Saskatoon, "Director explains food bank philosophy," 29.3.85.
2. The categories and figures presented here are taken from the monthly compilations of a number of food banks which are published in newsletters and information kits. Where possible, there has been verbal

confirmation of the numbers. It should be noted that the food banks mentioned here have been able to keep accurate data, as they are able to record food received and distributed based on actual demand for bulk and emergency (i.e., individual/family) food.

3. See footnote 2.
4. *Toronto Star*, "Working Poor Swelling Ranks at Food Banks," 1984, undated.
5. Edmonton Food Bank, *Hunger in Our City*, p. 3-4.
6. Braun, M., Krumenachar, J., Piluk, M., Robinson, L., Wilson, J., "Research Data and Discussion of The Regina Food Bank: August to December 1984," unpublished paper, University of Regina, 18.4.85.
7. Canadian Council on Social Development, *Social Development OVERVIEW*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Winter, 1985), p.2.
8. *Vancouver Sun*, 3.3.84.
9. Hunt, S., "BC Food Bank," *Perception*, Vol. 6, No.4, 1983, p. 11.
10. CBC TV, "Fifth Estate," 26.2.85, interview with Hanna Gartner.
11. This figure is the total average number of people in social allowance aided families fed per month. It includes repeat clients and so is really person-equivalents, not individuals.
12. Callahan, Marilyn, "The Human Costs of Restraint," in Magnussen, W., et al. (eds.), *The New Reality*, New Star Books, Vancouver 1984, p. 228-229.
13. CBC TV "Fifth Estate," 26.2.85.
14. Saskatoon Union of Unemployed Workers, "SUUW News," Vol. 3, No. 4, April 1985.
15. *Star Phoenix*, 29.3.85.

D. Hunger: A National Crisis?

The rise of the food banks in Canada is a tale of two evils: wasted food and hunger in a land of plenty. Some might suggest that to speak of hunger as a national crisis in Canada in the 1980's is melodramatic, and alarmist. However, the experiences of the food banks suggests that hunger is a crisis of major proportions. The view expressed by Grace McCarthy, the British Columbia Minister presiding over the breakdown of her province's welfare system, is a false one: that there is no hunger in Canada and that if we want to know what real hunger is, we should look to Ethiopia. The massive starvation in that country, as well as others, is a human tragedy beyond description, but the fact remains that in Canada hundreds of thousands of Canadians are not able to eat properly. Their point of comparison is the Canadian lifestyle.

The point should be made that if Canada could manage to sort out its own food distribution system and ensure that no one was left hungry, then it might have more to offer Ethiopia. As the Reverend Iris Williams of Grant A.M.E. Church in Toronto said recently after fasting for seven days to buy food for a Haitian mission, "Giving food to people is easy: our real job is to make sure they can get it for themselves."[1] This statement applies as much to Canada as it does to Ethiopia.

Is there a national crisis of hunger in Canada? The answer must be an unequivocal yes, if the evidence of the food banks is to be believed. First, the problem is clearly national in scope given that food banks exist in eight out of ten provinces and all provinces provide some emergency feeding programmes. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians have been using food banks and these programmes. Second, it is a crisis because the state system of public welfare and the private charities between them are unable to cope: people are being turned away from food banks after their welfare cheques have been exhausted. The basic subsistence provisions of the Canada Assistance Plan and provincial social assistance programmes are not being met. Food banks are stepping in to fill the gaps, but they also cannot cope. Yet the question remains: how hungry are the people applying to the food banks?

How hungry are those using the food banks?

Again, no systematic studies have been done but the food banks can help us to gain a clearer picture of the situation. If we mean by "hunger" the exhausted condition caused by lack of food, then the food banks have plenty of evidence of this condition. For instance, discussions with food bank workers revealed that children in British Columbia have been crying for lack of food when they have accompanied their parents to the food bank. Other children in Vancouver have been seen eating raw potatoes or biting into bread as soon as the food is handed out. A community health worker in Saskatchewan stated that "special need allowances are insufficient for babies. Everything falls just short." A small study of one agency in Regina which refers people to the food bank revealed that 30 per cent of those applying had no food in their homes and seventy per cent had only very little.[2] Very little means a packet of margarine, or a few eggs and some bread. In other words, not enough to last another day. In Edmonton, an emergency food situation is defined either as no food or less than one day's supply in the household. People in Langford, British Columbia, have been without food for two to three days before coming to the food bank. These situations are all too common across the country.

People are also cutting back on food. Community consultations conducted in 1984 by the Food Action Coalition of Toronto indicated that one of the last things people want to do when they run out of food is seek handouts. Most of the 104 people consulted said they skipped meals or ate less, eliminating such foods as cheese, eggs and fruit.[3]

Another sign that hunger is a significant problem is the lengths to which people will go to get food. In Vancouver, people have lined up in the predawn hours to be at the head of the line-up at 1:00 p.m. at the Christ Church distribution centre. If they are there first, they stand a better chance of receiving miscellaneous "top-up" items. People walk 20 to 30 blocks in the rain. Some people, of course, will not make it to the food banks: the elderly, the handicapped. Food bank organizers call them the "shut-ins." Others who live in remote areas simply have no access to food banks at all. And there are people who have no cooking facilities and depend on the food banks to receive food which can be eaten straight away. No doubt many such people have also patronized soup kitchens.

Hungry children:

The problems facing school meal programmes attest to other dimensions of the problem of hunger and inadequate nutrition in Canada. The existence of school meal programmes is spasmodic, and there is no major public support for such services. However, the Edmonton Food Bank does supply bulk food for nutrition snack programmes in some inner city schools, supported at first by the City Centre Church Corporation.

In Regina, certain publicly-funded community school projects support nutrition programmes. One such programme provides two breakfasts a week and daily snacks. Up to a third of the 300 children in the school participate in the programme, though all are eligible. Clearly, there is a need both for food and a social time. Children are waiting by 7:00 a.m. for the breakfast, which is served after 8:00 a.m. No food is ever left. In fact, other children who come to school with lunch boxes put what they do not eat on a tray for the children without food. None of that food is ever thrown away. This excellent programme needs to be expanded to other schools. However, the Department of Education, which funds the projects through its affirmative action policies, says it has only limited funds.

The Reverend Faye Waleling of St. Columbia House, a United Church settlement house in the Pointe St. Charles district of Montreal, also stressed the importance of school meals. The settlement house provides a weekday lunch to 150 to 250 elementary school children. The charge is 25 cents but lunch is free if parents cannot pay. Now there is a proposal to close the school and move the children to schools elsewhere, and one of the objections of neighbourhood parents is that the children will no longer receive a good nourishing meal once a day. The St. Columbia House is also interesting in that it concentrates on economic and social development and does not see its role as handing out free food. The House should not, it feels, be drawn into the work of the government.

Child and youth hunger is acute and wide-spread. Charlotte Bonds reports that:

> Streetworkers at Contact School (in Toronto), an alternative high school in the Regent Park area, are concerned about frequently having to stretch a food budget for 40 to feed up to 250 hungry teenagers. June Callwood at Jessie's, a support service for adolescent mothers, comments that the Sunday evening meal there is drawing almost more young mothers and babies than they can seat, and that "they are eating with the kind of desperate expressions people wore during the Depression."[4]

In Montreal, 20 year-old Pierre Sabourin, a founding member of the Regroupement autonome des jeunes (Independent Youth Coalition), commonly known as RAJ, was quoted as saying that on the first day of each month, he gains eight pounds after he gets his welfare cheque. "This morning, I weighed 122 pounds, tomorrow I will weigh 130 pounds . . . Today, so far, I have eaten two slices of bread and a slice of cheese. Tonight, I will have fried potatoes and canned soup."[5] He went on to say that the $156 a month he gets under Quebec's welfare system cannot be stretched to cover his basic needs for a whole month.

Of course, not only children and young people are coming to the food banks and feeding programmes. As we have noted, users comprise people of all ages, including the elderly, people on social assistance and unemployment insurance, people on fixed incomes, people at work, people with no income, and people living in hostels and institutions. The unemployed are clearly a major group, as are those on "welfare." Women and children are, however, significant users of food banks; and hunger is a family matter.

Access to nutritious food:

Food banks are able only to nibble at this problem of hunger. To a large extent, the causes of hunger lie in the very welfare system which the food banks prop up. Dr. Alexander Macpherson, Medical Officer of Health for the City of Toronto, reported in March 1984 that there was a serious problem of access to nutritious food for poor people in his city.[6] Their health was being affected. The report cites certain findings of a 1983 study, ". . . And the poor get poorer," of the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto. In particular the study notes:

> . . . the stark inadequacy of current assistance programmes is revealed when measured against three different economic indicators: Budget Guides of the Social Planning Council; Poverty Lines of the National Council of Welfare; and the Median Income for all wage earning Canadians. Taking different family size and specific provincial social assistance programs into account, benefits range from 46.1 to 71.8 per cent of the Budget Guides; from 43.5 to 70.4 per cent of the Poverty Lines and an astounding 23.8 to 33.8 per cent of the Median Income.[7]

There is little wonder that the Statistics Canada 1983 report on "Family Food Expenditure in Canada" showed that persons in the two lowest income decile spent on food only half what Agriculture Canada reported a nutritious food basket should cost for a family of four — $83.78.

As one welfare recipient was reported as saying in the Macpherson Report, "There's surviving and then there's eating and then there's nourishment and we (on welfare) seldom get to nourishment."[8] This situation is common across Canada. Malnourished expectant mothers, leading to under-developed children with health problems, are very much a part of today's society. Nor should we be surprised. In 1973 the National Council of Welfare was pointing out the nutritional problems of Canadian children.[9] No wonder children are gnawing at raw potatoes on the bread lines.

Hunger has become a national crisis largely because welfare benefits are inadequate to meet the subsistence costs of the poor, not only for food but other items as well. And one sure sign that the problem is critical is that food banks are in the business of substituting private food for public cash benefits. Food banks saw their initial task as using surplus food to supplement the diets of people in need. But, as the Edmonton Survey points out, there must be major inadequacies in the Alberta social allowance system if 60 per cent of those receiving food through the Edmonton Food Bank are also social allowance recipients. In Saskatchewan and British Columbia, the proportions of those on "welfare" are in fact higher. Given the experience of the food banks, the only tenable conclusion is that the crisis of hunger in Canada is a direct result of the collapse of the public safety net, a net designed to prevent this very situation.

Notes

1. Bond, C., "Hunger on the increase in Toronto," *Globe and Mail*, 1984, undated.
2. Regina Welfare Rights Centre. Unpublished data, 1983/84.
3. Bond, "Hunger on the increase," *Globe and Mail.*
4. Ibid.
5. Canadian Press report, *The Leader-Post*, Regina, February 25, 1985.
6. Macpherson, A.S., *Access to Nutritious Food — a Problem For Poor People in Toronto*, Dept. of Public Health, City of Toronto, March 1984, p. 9.
7. Ibid., p. 4.
8. Ibid., p. 2.
9. National Council of Welfare, *One Child, One Choice*, March 1973.

II

THE COLLAPSE OF THE PUBLIC SAFETY NET

A. *The Public Safety Net in Canada*

The rise of the food banks is concrete evidence of the collapse of the public safety net in Canada. Food banks are both symptoms and symbols of what is wrong with Canada's welfare state; they reflect public perceptions that state social spending is too high and sub-poverty social assistance benefits adequate; and they represent (perhaps unwittingly) what the new right thinks should be done to change the system.

The term "public safety net" refers principally to programmes of last resort or residual welfare, most notably social assistance benefits provided by provincial and municipal governments. These programmes of last resort are for those Canadians who either have no incomes or whose incomes are so inadequate that the basic necessities of life (food, clothing and shelter), are beyond them. Such programmes fall within the constitutional responsibilities of provincial governments but, since 1966, the federal government, through the Canada Assistance Plan, has played a significant role by ensuring that half of the costs of social assistance and personal social services are borne by the government in Ottawa.

Also included as part of the safety net for the purpose of this study is unemployment insurance.[1] Together, unemployment insurance and social assistance form the key strand in the web of income support schemes designed to guarantee a social minimum. The safety net, and particularly unemployment insurance, are based on twin assumptions: that economic growth and full employment can be relied upon and are the best forms of welfare; and that any interruptions in earnings are consequently short term and income support schemes need only to be planned with this contingency in mind. Of course there are other reasons apart from the behaviour of the labour market why people lack incomes (physical disability, age, mental incapacity and so on) but long term benefits for these people tend to be related to labour market conditions.

It is important to demonstrate the relationship between food banks and social assistance and unemployment insurance programmes as these are the major social welfare programmes expected to bear the brunt of the lack of income during periods of massive unemployment. If the rise of food banks is critically related to the essential inadequacy of social assistance and unemployment insurance, what does this situation say about the nature of political and public support for a tax-based system of social security in Canada? This system, so it is said, has been designed to pool risks, and to provide, as a right, adequate safeguards against a range of risks and contingencies. The idea of a public safety net, through which no one should drop, is central to the working of the social security system.

Social security and state welfare:

As Chart 1 shows, the programmes constituting the public safety net refer to only a small fraction of Canada's income security programmes and social services. Yet their place within this network of welfare state programmes is crucial. Without them, there would be only charitable, ad hoc relief.

Chart 1. Programmes of the Canadian Welfare State

INCOME SECURITY PROGRAMMES

Universal Transfer Payments:
Family Allowances
Old Age Security

Selective Cash Transfers:
Old Age Security-Guaranteed Income Supplement
Canada Assistance Plan

Social Insurance Programmes:
Workers' Compensation
Unemployment Insurance
Canada and Quebec Pension Plans

Tax Credits:
Refundable Child Tax Credit
Other Nonrefundable Tax Credits

Other:
Minimum Wage
Employment Strategy
Job Creation

SOCIAL SERVICES

Universal Services:
Health Care
Primary Education
Secondary Education

Selective Services — Partial List:
Child Welfare
Child Day Care
Legal Aid
Indian and Metis Friendship Centre Services
Services for Victims of Violence
Correctional Services
Rehabilitation Services
Employment-related Services
Services for People with Special Needs
Home Care
Housing

Source: Djao, A. W., *Inequality and Social Policy*, Wiley & Sons, 1983, see Table 9.1, p. 107. "Other" category has been added.

The framework for this system in Canada, as described by Guest, has its roots in the Great Depression and the onset of World War II with the introduction of unemployment insurance in 1940 and the Marsh Report on Social Security for Canada in 1943.[2]

Leonard Marsh, a key actor in the development of the Canadian welfare state, was at that time a federal civil servant. The government of the day assigned him the task of drawing up an initial set of principles and proposals for a comprehensive system of social security in Canada.[3] This report, following on the heels of the Beveridge report which laid the groundwork for post-war reconstruction in the United Kingdom addressed a range of critical social and economic policy issues.

As Guest shows, Marsh outlined in ". . . a clear and unequivocal fashion the role that a social security system, buttressed by a comprehensive employment policy, could play in lifting people out of poverty and securing for them a defensible social minimum."[4] In particular, the report addressed all of those interruptions to earnings and livelihood caused by unemployment, sickness, disability and old age. In his report, Marsh was concerned with showing the extent, nature and consequences of universal risks. In other words, he showed that social needs of men, women and children are not simply the lot of certain income groups but are experienced to a greater or lesser extent by everyone.

In this light, the report also focussed attention on

> . . . those contingencies which affect the adequacy of income, which Marsh grouped into two categories. There are the contingencies requiring special expenditures which may strain a family's budget, such as births, deaths, accidents and major illness. Secondly, there is the threat to income adequacy posed by society's failure to relate wages to the size of a worker's family.[5]

The main plank in Marsh's proposals to guard against employment risks was a two part social insurance scheme for wage earners suffering loss of earnings and flat rate benefits for gainfully-occupied persons facing old age retirement, permanent disability and so on. To protect people against more risks, a comprehensive system of health insurance paid from general revenue was to be introduced. Also included were children's allowances. At the same time, a national investment programme and training and guidance facilities were recommended in anticipation of post-war depression.

Other reports and publications appeared at this time. They included J.J. Heagerty's report on Health Insurance (March, 1943), Charlotte Whitton's *The Dawn of Ampler Life* (1943), Harry Cassidy's *Social Security and Reconstruction in Canada* (1943), and the Curtis Report in which Marsh was editor and research coordinator for housing (1944).[6]

Slowly, in piecemeal fashion, and despite federal-provincial constitutional debates and wrangles over social security legislation, the major building blocks of Canada's welfare state and public safety net have been set in place since the end of World War II. Business and professional groups sometimes opposed and sometimes supported these measures. The state gradually assumed new responsibilities. At the same time, it must be emphasized that economic growth, full employment and a minimum of social security were seen as the cornerstones of reconstruction and the post-war consensus.

Symptoms and symbols of a collapsed safety net:

If people today are concerned about the rise of the food banks, it is because food banks are seen as governments' retreat from their responsibilities for protecting those left out in the cold and for safeguarding and enhancing social welfare rights. Food banks are symptoms of the breakdown of a social consensus developed over 35 years. The new attitude is best summed up in a comment by the Alberta Minister for Health and Community Dr. Neil Webber, speaking recently on the CBC radio show, "As It Happens."[7] In response to criticism of the social allowance system by the Edmonton Food Bank, he said that people in need were not just a government responsibility. Moreover, "those people who say government has to do it all, it is their responsibility, they are out to lunch."[7] What Webber is suggesting is a return to the charitable ad hoc relief of the 1930's, the very situation the welfare state was designed to prevent.

It is important to make this link because, symbolically, food banks point to voluntarism as the alternative strategy for dealing with the poor. As such, food banks serve as ideological marker flags of neo-conservatism. One component of such thinking is that the burden of the costs of change — economic, demographic, technological, ideological — should be passed back to the voluntary/charitable sector, to the family and to labour. What this means, of course, is that churches and non-government organizations, unions and poor people's groups, and women, children, the unemployed, natives and low income earners not only carry the heaviest burdens but are also expected to contribute the most. As these responsibilities are taken up out of sheer necessity and humanitarianism by Canada's most vulnerable groups, (e.g., by food banks) so the new right's view that welfare state spending is profligate and a major cause of economic and social decline appears to be demonstrated.

However, it is important that we neither accept such arguments at face value nor dismiss them as ideological rhetoric. The case must be made that the rise of food banks represents a significant turning point in how Canadians think about government's responsibility for those at risk, about the alternative strategies and their consequences for people in need and about the idea of a public safety net. Given the existence of a public safety net in Canada, we need to ask ourselves why food banks have emerged in the 1980's. We will first pay particular attention to the views and experiences of the food banks themselves, and then consider the evidence and reasons for the collapse of the safety net.

Notes

1. Unlike social assistance, unemployment insurance is only partially financed through general revenues. However, compulsory social insurance premiums are simply a different form of taxation.
2. Guest, *Social Security*, p. 83-141.
3. Ibid., p. 112.
4. Ibid., p. 113.
5. Ibid., p. 114.
6. Ibid., p. 127.
7. CBC Radio, "As It Happens," 21 Feb 1985, interview with Elizabeth Gray.

B. Why Food Banks?: Their Own Views and Experiences

Waste:

One common thread running through the history and experience of the voluntary/charitable food banks is the view that surplus or wasted food is the primary reason for the growth of food banks in Canada. While no one seems to know for sure how much food is wasted annually by the Canadian food production system, the United States figure of 20 per cent is often quoted. Indeed, some food bank organizers argue that surplus food is the major driving force behind Canadian food banks.

This emphasis suggests that the rise of food banks does not have much, if anything, to do with increasing numbers of people requiring emergency food. The prime motivation is the existence of massive quantities of surplus food, which should be shared and put to good use. The issues are seen as practical and immediate, not ideological. Food banking is simply a question of moving food from one point to another, where it can be quickly used. Food is not wasted or dumped, and costs, at least to the retailers, are kept down.

This view avoids the whole question of food for profit and the pricing policies in food production and retailing. Food pricing is a critically important policy issue which must be addressed. To the extent that food banks have become voluntary extensions of the public welfare system, so they are also becoming integral components of the food industry. Because they depend on corporate donors for their surplus food, they are unlikely to question profits and pricing policies. Food banks help us to avoid such questions.

These questions are, however, addressed by the People's Food Commission in its 1980 report entitled *The Land of Milk and Money*. Clearly, however, the existence of food surplus to the needs of profit in the food industry is crucial to the survival and development of food banks. (The cost of dumped or wasted food will already have been reflected in the prices for food paid by consumers.) However, it is also clear that Canadian food banks did not arise for this reason alone. It was not simply wasted food which triggered their development. There were also many hungry people.

Hunger:

A second, and it would seem more plausible, explanation for the rise of food banks was the growing fact of hunger. Agencies which serve free lunches, such as the Marian Centre in Regina, churches in Edmonton, soup kitchens and hostels in Toronto and Montreal and relief organizations in the Maritimes all began to experience increasing demands for food. This was a common experience in all provinces and was particularly acute in the West. British Columbia was the worst affected, and the demand for food grew as thousands of people were thrown out of work. Not only churches and voluntary agencies, but also unions, became involved in collecting and distributing food. In other words, those agencies at the cutting edge of poverty began to see the demand for food, and they could not cope. The traditional soup kitchens and free lunch programmes were overwhelmed. It was this context as much as that of surplus food that caused the rise of the food bank.

Altruism and conservation:

These agencies also had a number of things going for them as they set about the task of organizing food banks: the charitable concern and altruistic good will of many people shocked by the evidence of need, linkages to the existing United States food bank movement, and a long-standing historical reliance on public-private cooperation in social services.

There is no overall estimate of the amount and type of voluntary activity which has been the mainstay of Canadian food banks. The importance and strength of such support can be imagined if Edmonton's volunteers are in any way typical. A February 20, 1985, news release reports that:

> The Edmonton Gleaners Association and its ninety-one member churches and agencies wish to publicly thank and commend the thousands of Edmontonians who have contributed to the work of the Food Bank. Over 6,000 hours of work per month are contributed by volunteers. Nearly half a million cans of food have been donated by individuals in response to public food drives. In addition, the food

industry has donated well over one million pounds of food . . .[1]

These figures demonstrate the food bank's intent to promote sharing surplus food and neighbour helping neighbour. Food banks from east to west report similar experiences. There was an upsurge of public and charitable concern, urged on by many organizations trying to cope with the rising demand for food. The churches in particular played a leading role, and in Alberta and Saskatchewan it was through the Roman Catholic church workers that links were made to the United States food bank movement.

U.S. food banks:

The fact that food banks already existed in the United States is significant, as well as the fact that Canadian food bank organizers sought their advice. The initial link for the prairie provinces was to the St. Mary's Food Bank in Phoenix, Arizona, the first food bank established in the United States in 1966. It had its roots in the charitable work of the Catholic Church and the United States soup kitchens. There was clearly a strong link between surplus food and hunger, a relationship which also predominates in the Canadian food banks.

The brochures of the St. Mary's food bank, as of many food banks in Canada, speak of hunger and waste. They are also quite specific about who will benefit from the clearing house services which they provide. Charities will gain through reduced food costs and local families' emergency food needs will be met.

It is also important to understand about the United States food bank movement that since the mid-seventies, Second Harvest, an entirely private and non-profit network of 61 regional food banks has emerged as a national coordinator and surplus food broker. *The Economist* notes that:

> This network stretches across the nation, using food that would otherwise go to waste, and shunts it quickly and in large quantities from grower or manufacturer to the various centres that feed the hungry . . . . It has grown with such speed that it has already left the agriculture department's much criticized surplus commodity programme ensnarled in red tape, far behind.[2]

The United States' message was clear: the existing array of food stamps and welfare programmes were inadequate to meet the needs of hungry Americans. Food banks were seen, if not as an answer, as another layer of voluntary support for the public safety net. In Canada, while the social welfare system is markedly different in a number of key aspects, the message seemed to be received and accepted by the Canadian food banks. Voluntary organizations were essential in the current crisis, and over the long term could contribute to a more efficient welfare system.

Canadian food banks, extensions of existing systems:

It is difficult to say whether Canadian food banks would have grown the way they have without the influence of their forerunners in the United States. Canadian social welfare is marked by a strong collective state involvement, unlike programmes to the south. It is clear, though, that a commitment to public-private cooperation in social services is also part of Canadian social welfare history. It even extends to income assistance and emergency aid, attested to by the work of the Salvation Army, church missions, soup kitchens and voluntary agencies which provide food vouchers in Ontario. In fact, as one food bank organizer in Ontario expressed it, "The public and private sectors have always worked together. The private sector has always been supplementing welfare programs. It is not always important to have public agencies doing all the work." At the same time, he acknowledged that no one wanted to fudge over the issue of inadequate public income maintenance for housing and food.

The point is, however, that Canadian food banks did not seriously challenge either dominant values or institutional arrangements to become established. Even the labour/union food banks of British Columbia and Alberta received federal funding for their work. A network of public-private cooperation in income assistance certainly existed in Central and Eastern Canada and was also evident, to a lesser degree, in the West. This cooperation provided a firm bedrock for the newly-forming food banks, which were in large measure creatures of the churches and non-government organizations.

In this sense, it could be argued that food banks are not a new phenomenon, merely a rearrangement of existing voluntary services to gather and distribute surplus food. Churches have been handing out food to destitute Canadians for generations; soup kitchens and missions have been around for a long time; and, in many provinces, such bodies have worked hand-in-glove with provincial social assistance programmes. When demand began to rise and make it more difficult for the voluntary sector to do its work, the NGO's and churches simply reorganized. This view does not explain the growth of labour/union food banks in British Columbia, but in large measure it is the story of the rise of Canadian food banks.

Exposing the limits and inadequacy of state welfare:

What is new about recent developments is that they have exposed the shortcomings of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) and the workings of provincial welfare programmes. While the federal-provincial cost-sharing legislation of 1966 certainly established the right of people to receive adequate benefits (even though it left the levels of benefits to the provinces), few questions were asked about those using the residual relief services of churches and missions. The voluntary agencies coped in the cities, and the number of people using them was not excessive. In rural areas, the situation is not so clear.

However, in the early eighties, the demands on public assistance programmes grew, and the pressure was felt by provincial governments and the municipalities. Increased pressure was also experienced by the churches and NGO's.

Some food bank organizers feel that getting food directly to people who need it is more efficient and less time-consuming for clients and workers alike than burrowing through the red tape of provincial welfare bureaucracies. If neighbour could help neighbour through a direct transfer of goods in kind (food) rather than cash benefits (welfare payments), then so much the better. If one could also be sure that people would receive food instead of spending their welfare cheques on other items, this would be a vast improvement. Certainly, some clients and social workers have found it easier to use food banks for emergency food than be subjected to stigmatizing and time-consuming needs tests to get emergency food vouchers. And, in some provinces (e.g., Saskatchewan), there is a clear disincentive to receiving emergency welfare funds, as these are deducted from the next month's cheque. In other words, service from the food bank is faster and more effective. This, in part, also explains the rise of food banks. They were for many a reliable, quick and increasingly necessary alternative to public welfare. Food banks were born of necessity in troubled times.

A strong *prima facie* case can also be made that the growth of food banks between 1981 and 1984 was caused by the breakdown of the public safety net. The records, reports and public statements of the food banks and the staff bear ample testimony to the unwillingness and incapacity of provincial social assistance programmes and the federal unemployment insurance commission to guarantee adequate incomes.

Food bank directors in Edmonton, Vancouver and Regina are all on record as pointing to the inadequacy of social assistance benefits. These are typical views. All food banks report that the periods of heaviest demand are towards the end of each month when welfare and unemployment insurance cheques run out; government financial aid workers in all provinces refer their clients to food banks and, as the Edmonton 1983-84 study on food bank use showed, there was a strong correlation between increased demand for food and social assistance cutbacks introduced in July, 1983 by Alberta Social Services and Community Health.[3] That food banks themselves must turn people away empty-handed also suggests that the crisis is acute and that the notion of a public right to adequate assistance for people in need, established in the Canada Assistance Plan, is hollow rhetoric.

The Honorable Grace McCarthy, British Columbia's Minister of Human Resources, claimed on CBC's "Fifth Estate" (February 26, 1985) that her government adhered to the *Canada Assistance Plan Act*, which she acknowledged "was put together so that there would be no one who would starve in Canada, and no one who would not have a roof over their head." If the evidence of the food banks alone is to be believed, Mrs. McCarthy would be well advised to discover how her own income maintenance programme (GAIN)[4] falls far short of honouring the intentions of the Canada Assistance Plan which she espoused.

Driven by the desire to locate and distribute surplus food and by the growing number of hungry people whose social rights to assistance had been denied by provincial governments, it was hardly surprising that food banks became one of Canada's fastest-growing industries in the early eighties.[5]

To speak, however, of the collapse of Canada's public safety net might seem to be somewhat premature. What further evidence is there in addition to the experiences of the food banks themselves? And why, during a period when social assistance and unemployment insurance programmes were most needed, were they exposed as being fundamentally inadequate?

Notes

1. News release, Edmonton Gleaners Association, 20.2.85.
2. *The Economist*, 19.11.83.
3. Edmonton Food Bank, *Hunger in Our City*, p. 3.
4. GAIN — Guaranteed Annual Income for Need is cost-shared 50%/50% by the federal government under the terms of the *Canada Assistance Plan Act*.
5. *Globe and Mail*, March 21, 1985. The reference is actually to Alberta, but the inference applies to other Canadian provinces.

C. *Evidence of the Collapse of the Public Safety Net*

To demonstrate that Canada's residual system of social welfare (the Canada Assistance Program) has broken down, we must show that the federal and provincial governments are failing to meet their legislated mandate to provide adequate assistance to persons in need.

In this section, evidence will be brought forward which clearly shows that many provincial governments looked the other way as social assistance caseloads rose dramatically between 1981 and 1984 — the period which saw the mushrooming of food banks. The evidence will further show that benefits had been inadequate for many years; that cutbacks further reduced benefits for certain groups of people; that increasingly stringent eligibility criteria further eroded people's rights to receive adequate benefits; and that attempts at progressive reforms were held back in the seventies and eighties. In fact, all levels of government have in different ways supported the rise of food banks and usedthem as substitutes for public welfare. Explanations for these events will be considered in the next section.

The point will also be made that, for each individual who finds him or herself asking for food and is denied further assistance by the state, the safety net has indeed collapsed. At that point its existence is purely an abstract notion.

1. Exploding caseloads

a) Unemployment: official, hidden and chronic

In Canada between 1981 and 1984, the period which saw the start and growth of food banks in this country, unemployment, together with unemployment insurance and social assistance caseloads, grew quickly and in Western Canada, rose dramatically.

Between March, 1981 and 1984 (see Chart 2), unemployment grew by over 61 per cent in Canada. The numbers of people out of work stood officially at 1.4 million compared to 869,000 three years earlier. While the overall rate of unemployment stood at 11.4 per cent in March 1984, down from 12.5 per cent a year earlier, the rates continued to climb in Newfoundland (20.3 per cent), Prince Edward Island (12.5 per cent), Saskatchewan (8.4 per cent) and British Columbia (14.4 per cent). The fact that the unemployment rates in three other provinces (Nova Scotia, 12.7 per cent; New Brunswick, 14.7 per cent; and, Quebec, 13.0 per cent) were also higher than the overall Canadian rates pointed to the seriousness of the situation.

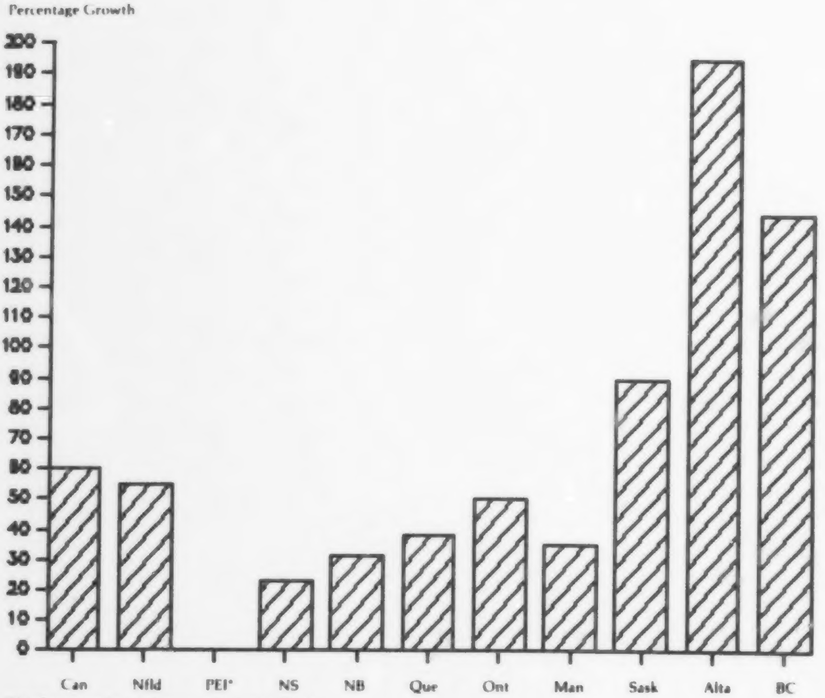
It should also be noted that the total percentage growth of jobless people in Saskatchewan (90 per cent), British Columbia (144 per cent) and Alberta (196 per cent) far exceeded the rate for Canada as a whole. If such yardsticks do not sufficiently demonstrate the dramatic changes occurring in the labour force, the point is driven home when we consider the actual numbers of people made jobless.

In Saskatchewan, the jump was from 21,000 to 40,000 people, in Alberta, from 45,000 to an astonishing 133,000 people, and in British Columbia, from 81,000 to 198,000. In Quebec and Ontario, though the rates of increase were not as high, over 840,000 were without work, and in all other provinces the situation was little better. Two points are particularly noteworthy: the unemployment rates were in the lower end of the high levels experienced in the Depression,[1] and in the early eighties, it was Western Canada which was experiencing the sharpest increase in unemployment.

Nor is that the worst of the news. If we take into account hidden unemployment or the so-called discouraged worker effect, the picture of joblessness province by province is blacker than is painted by the official unemployment statistics. For example, in British Columbia for the first quarter of 1984 the reported unemployment rate was 15.4 per cent while the actual unemployment rate has been estimated at 17.7 per cent. What explains this discrepancy?[4]

Surveys conducted in March of each year by Statistics Canada of people not in the labour force (see Table 4) show in 1984, that over 300,000 Canadians were not looking for work for labour-market related reasons. These reasons include "waiting for recall," "waiting for replies" and "believe no work is available." Over half of these people had given up looking for work because they believed there was no work available.[3] When we also consider that these figures do not include status Indians

Chart 2: Percentage Growth in Number Unemployed, Canada and Provinces, March 1981-March 1984



*No change in the number unemployed in P.E.I

	Can.	Nfld.	P.E.I.	N.S.	N.B.	Que.	Ont.	Man.	Sask.	Alta.	B.C.
Percentage growth in numbers of unemployed Mar 81 to Mar 84	61	55.2	0	23.1	31.3	38.4	50.2	35.5	90.5	195.6	144.4
Number unemployed March 1984 ('000)	1,399*	45	7	48*	42*	407*	434*	42*	40	133*	198
Unemployment rate March 1984	11.4	20.3	12.5	12.7	14.7	13.0	9.4	8.2	8.4	10.7	14.4

*Numbers of unemployed down from March, 1983

Source: *Canadian Statistical Review*, June 1982 and November 1984.

living on reserves, where unemployment rates can be as high as 90 per cent, persons living in the Yukon and Northwest Territories and residents of penitentiaries and correctional institutions the dimensions of joblessness become ominous. What is alarming, but not unexpected, about the provincial breakdowns is that the three western provinces again show the highest rates of increase. Their numbers grew by half in Saskatchewan and doubled or more than doubled in Alberta and British Columbia. In terms of absolute numbers, however, Quebec's situation is by far the bleakest.

Table 4: Hidden Unemployed by Labour Market Related Reasons* by Province and Canada, March 1981-1984

	1981	1982	1983	1984	Total % Change
Newfoundland	23,000	30,000	31,000	28,000	22
P.E.I.	—	—	—	4,000	—
Nova Scotia	10,000	13,000	14,000	14,000	40
New Brunswick	18,000	19,000	21,000	27,000	50
Quebec	97,000	143,000	148,000	131,000	35
Ontario	40,000	41,000	65,000	43,000	8
Manitoba	5,000	6,000	8,000	6,000	20
Saskatchewan	4,000	4,000	6,000	6,000	50
Alberta	4,000	5,000	13,000	12,000	200
British Columbia	15,000	20,000	26,000	31,000	107
Canada	218,000	283,000	335,000	302,000	39

* Persons who want work and are available for work in the Reference Week. Labour market related reasons for not looking for work comprise waiting for recall, waiting for replies and believe no work available.

Source: Statistics Canada. *The Labour Force*, Catalogue 71-001, March 1984, pp. 101-118. Annual March Survey of persons not in the labour force.

The point to be made from this data is that Canada's unemployment rate is higher than the official rates suggest and it is moreover comparable to the situation in the Depression of the 1930's. Clearly not everyone who is unemployed is experiencing financial hardship. However, it is important to recognize the impact of unemployment on the country's safety net which, we must remember, was designed only to respond to short term interruptions in earnings.

This situation is particularly significant, given that chronic or long term unemployment, defined as labour demand deficiency beyond cyclical fluctuations and functional or structural unemployment, is a growing problem in Canada. Its seriousness is highlighted in a Statistics Canada report:

> Since the onset of the recession, there has also been a dramatic change in the duration of unemployment. In 1980, the unemployed comprised approximately equal proportions of those unemployed 1-4 weeks (33.4 per cent), 5-13 weeks (31.4 per cent) and 14 weeks or more (35.2 per cent). By 1983, 50.1 per cent of the unemployed had been without work fourteen weeks or more, but this proportion came down slightly in 1984 to 47.0 per cent. The proportion changed even more dramatically over the five year period. By 1984, one in ten of the unemployed had been out of work for more than a year with only 3.8 per cent in 1980.[3]

These are extremely serious social policy issues and we should note the warnings of Abraham Rotstein, professor of political conomy at the University of Toronto, who asks, "How will we address the two million people in this country who are out of work, and who, economists maintain, are unlikely to find work until sometime in the early 1990's?"[4]

While they remain out of work, people will have to turn to unemployment insurance and social assistance but the pressures on these two social programmes are enormous. In fact, recent experience tells us they are unable to cope.

b) Unemployment insurance

The impact of rising joblessness is clear when we compare the increases in people receiving unemployment insurance benefits of all types between 1981 and 1984 (Table 5a) with those simply receiving regular benefits (Table 5b). The distinction is important. Global figures for unemployment insurance benefits include all claimants receiving regular benefits as well as benefits for sickness, maternity, retirement, fishing, work sharing, job creation and training. It would be misleading to conclude that the numbers and growth rates shown in Table 5a accurately reflect the burden of unemployment responded to by the state.

However, it is also clear that the Unemployment Insurance Commission has been experiencing very heavy demands for benefits. Again, the most acute pressure has been experienced in western Canada with total increases of 79 per cent in Saskatchewan, and staggering rises of 272 per cent in Alberta and 158 per cent in British Columbia between 1981 and 1984. Even Manitoba's unemployment insurance cases increased by 64 per cent, higher than the Canadian average. In March 1984, 1.38 million Canadians were receiving some form of unemployment insurance benefit.

In 1984 six provinces — Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia — all recorded reductions since 1983, but whether this meant people were back at work is difficult to say. While some will have found jobs, others may have stopped looking for work or may have been simply recycled to provincial social assistance.

Table 5a: Unemployment Insurance Cases* by Province, Territory and Canada and Total Percentage Change, March 1981-1984

	1981	1982	1983	1984	% Change
Newfoundland	60,733	66,431	76,685	77,495	28
P.E.I.	12,133	13,205	14,363	16,313	34
Nova Scotia	49,342	59,728	66,386	66,711	35
New Brunswick	56,275	63,775	70,938	75,753	35
Quebec	309,713	410,081	458,990	421,127	36
Ontario	277,847	299,056	436,266	359,112	29
Manitoba	26,793	33,382	51,303	43,882	64
Saskatchewan	19,706	25,369	35,669	35,281	79
Alberta	29,299	50,527	117,386	109,102	272
British Columbia	68,904	121,768	181,689	177,989	158
Yukon	1,273	1,595	2,585	2,272	78
N.W.T.	797	1,023	1,855	1,578	98
Outside Canada	147	204	278	221	50
Canada	862,962	1,146,144	1,514,393	1,386,836	61

* Cases means beneficiaries in the official tabulations. Beneficiaries refers to all those persons receiving benefits for a specific week each month regardless of when they received payment. They include all claimants who receive benefits through the computer pay system. Excluded are year-round fishermen, some seasonal fishermen and some worksharing and job creation claimants who are paid through the manual pay system.

Source: 1981 to 1984 — *Inventory of Income Security Programs in Canada*. Health and Welfare Canada and provincial departments of social services (or their counterparts), January 1984.
1984 — *Statistical Report on the Operation of the Unemployment Insurance Act*. Statistics Canada. Catalogue 73-001.

The real impact of unemployment on the unemployment insurance system can be seen when we consider the growth of claimants receiving regular benefits (i.e., those related strictly to being out of work). As Table 5b indicates, the growth in numbers of people claiming regular benefits on account of unemployment alone was higher in all provinces than the increase in claimants of all kinds. In other words, unemployment was the major factor contributing to the growth of the unemployment insurance rolls.

Table 5b: Unemployment Insurance Cases by Regular Benefits, Provinces, Territories and Canada, March 1981-1984

	1981	1982	1983	1984	% Change
Newfoundland	47,133	52,702	61,743	63,189	34
P.E.I.	9,169	10,358	11,341	13,136	43
Nova Scotia	40,530	50,423	56,490	55,764	38
New Brunswick	50,666	57,962	63,863	68,676	36
Quebec	281,806	381,549	423,683	389,053	38
Ontario	193,491	262,091	383,162	316,131	63
Manitoba	22,221	28,722	43,041	37,904	71
Saskatchewan	16,463	22,023	31,590	31,563	92
Alberta	20,223	40,524	103,809	96,870	379
British Columbia	57,260	108,556	162,011	159,008	178
Yukon	1,107	1,414	2,320	2,020	82
N.W.T.	623	872	1,595	1,328	113
Outside Canada	124	179	258	193	56
Canada	740,816	1,017,375	1,344,906	1,234,835	67

Source: Statistics Canada, *Statistical Report on the Operation of the Unemployment Insurance Act*, Catalogue 73-001, April-June Quarterly, 1981-1984.

While in all provinces east of Manitoba the growth was lower than that for Canada as a whole, in Western Canada, particularly in Alberta and British Columbia, the increases were again little short of phenomenal. In fact, if we use 1983 as the cut-off, these increases (including those for Quebec, Ontario and Nova Scotia) would have been even higher. By March 1984, there were 1.2 million Canadians receiving unemployment insurance simply because of unemployment. This figure does not take into account spouses, children or other dependents.

However, the dramatic downturn in the economy and the sudden and tremendous demand on the unemployment insurance system can be seen most clearly when we compare the claimants receiving regular benefits for the three-year periods before and after 1981. Table 5c reveals that, from 1978 to 1981, all provinces experienced reductions in those claiming such benefits. While the downturn was marked for all provinces, the West not only felt the largest reductions (a measure of the strength of those economies) but, following 1981, also the largest increases. In other words, the West really did receive the full brunt of the recession, and the unemployment insurance net designed principally to accommodate short term interruptions in earnings was under siege.

Table 5c. Unemployment Insurance Cases by Regular Benefits, Percentage Changes Between March 1978, 1981 and 1984

	1978	% Change	1981	% Change	1984
Newfoundland	52,873	-11%	47,133	34%	63,189
P.E.I.	10,161	-10%	9,169	43%	13,136
Nova Scotia	47,349	-14%	40,530	38%	55,764
New Brunswick	54,483	- 7%	50,666	36%	68,676
Quebec	332,488	-15%	281,806	38%	389,053
Ontario	227,382	-15%	193,491	63%	316,131
Manitoba	26,457	-16%	22,221	71%	37,904
Saskatchewan	20,163	-18%	16,463	92%	31,563
Alberta	24,216	-16%	20,223	379%	96,870
British Columbia	89,434	-36%	57,260	178%	159,008
Yukon	1,599	-31%	1,107	82%	2,020
N.W.T.	986	-37%	623	113%	1,328
Outside Canada	424	-71%	124	56%	193
Canada	888,015	17%	740,816	67%	1,234,835

Source: Statistics Canada, *Statistical Report on the Operation of the Unemployment Insurance Act*, Catalogue 73-001, April-June Quarterly, 1978, 1981 and 1984.

c) Social assistance

When unemployment insurance runs out, there is only one place to turn: social assistance or, as it is more commonly known, "welfare." It is the last resort. Unlike unemployment insurance, social assistance is a provincial responsibility and in three provinces (Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba), certain benefits are administered by the municipality. Given the recession and the overwhelming strain on unemployment insurance, is there evidence that provincial social assistance systems were subject to similar stresses?

In March 1984 in Canada, 1 million people were receiving social assistance benefits (Table 6a). If we take into account their dependents the numbers practically double to 1.9 million. The picture is not encouraging, though a caveat should be entered before interpreting these figures. Each province is responsible for the design and scope of its social assistance programmes, and consequently programmes may vary widely from province to province. Also, programme/statistical reporting may have changed between 1981 and 1984 and, for this reason, the calculation of growth rates may be misleading, particularly those for Canada as a whole. However, these are the best figures available and the underlying story is not good.

Table 6a. Social Assistance Cases[1] by Province, Territories and Canada and Percentage Change, 1981-84

	1981	1982	1983	1984	Change
Newfoundland	20,275	20,009	20,747	21,800	8
P.E.I.	4,563	4,958	5,010	4,400	3
Nova Scotia[2]	28,637*	29,441*	31,563	32,200*	13
New Brunswick	29,590	29,680	32,600	32,500	10
Quebec	302,435	325,387	396,801	415,300	37
Ontario[2]	203,255*	214,874*	253,097*	261,500*	29
Manitoba[3]	23,612*	24,162*	29,010*	31,100*	32
Saskatchewan	22,605	23,613	29,455	31,400	39
Alberta	31,527	36,282	50,318	45,500	41
British Columbia[4]	66,277	75,247	112,780	127,400	92
Yukon	620	723	674	500	-10
N.W.T.	2,084	1,973	2,233	2,000	-4
Canada	735,480	786,349	964,288	1,005,600	37

* — estimate

1. A case represents any single person with no dependents, or a family in receipt of social assistance.
2. Family Benefits and General Assistance.
3. Social Allowances and Municipal Assistance.
4. GAIN: Basic Income Assistance only.

N.B. Provincial programme variation and programme/statistical reporting changes may result in misleading comparisons and growth rates.

Sources: 1981 to 1983: *Inventory of Income Security Programs in Canada*. Health and Welfare Canada and provincial departments of social services (or their counterparts), January 1984.

1984: Health and Welfare Canada — preliminary caseload data for all provinces/territories except British Columbia.

1984: British Columbia, Ministry of Human Resources, March 13, 1985.

As with unemployment insurance, there have been marked increases in the numbers and percentages of those receiving social assistance between 1981 and 1984.[5] While the increases in social assistance beneficiaries have been markedly lower province by province (with the exception of Quebec) than those for unemployment insurance, not unexpectedly, a similar pattern emerges: the increases in Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia have been the highest, with those in British Columbia nearly doubling. Quebec is the leader of the pack.

In another way, however, a different story is suggested. If one compares the changes between those receiving social assistance and regular unemployment insurance benefits between 1983 and 1984 (Tables 5b and 6a), it can be seen that while the number of unemployment insurance claimants dipped or remained the same in seven provinces, those on social assistance increased or remained the same in nine provinces. While it is clear that some people moving off unemployment insurance are finding jobs, others are moving onto provincial welfare rolls after having exhausted their unemployment insurance benefits. In this way, pressure is placed on provincial coffers and those needing income support face a new bureaucracy.

In the same way that official unemployment statistics understate the real numbers of unemployed, so do the figures for social assistance cases. A very significant group of people are excluded: registered Indians living on reserves and crown lands who receive social assistance through the federal government's Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. While comparable provincial figures are not available for the years 1981 to 1984, Table 6b suggests that the provincial statistics understate by between five and 10 per cent the actual numbers of people in Canada receiving social assistance.

In 1980-81, 59 per cent of all Indians living on reserves were receiving social assistance. The most acute pressure is experienced by Indian people living in the western provinces hardest hit by the recession. Of course, the story really told by these figures is one of gross inequality and racism.

The story of unemployment insurance and social assistance, the two key strands in the income support safety net of the Canadian welfare state, is one of dramatically expanding caseloads in the early 1980's. Even though there is some evidence that unemployment insurance caseloads began to drop from 1983 onwards, social assistance caseloads in eight provinces rose. The increases between 1981 and 1984 were sudden and dramatic when compared to those for the previous three years. The impact was felt most acutely in the three western provinces, particularly Alberta and British Columbia. For this reason alone, it is little wonder that the safety net collapsed and food banks came to the rescue. Unfortunately, this is only one element in the story: not only exploding caseloads brought about the breakdown of publicly-financed residual welfare in Canada.

Table 6b. Registered Indians on Reserves and Crown Lands Receiving Federal Social Assistance, Number and Estimated Percentage, by Region, Province, Territory and Canada, 1980-81

	Number of Registered Indians on Reserves and Crown Lands	Approximate Numbers of Social Assistance Beneficiaries Per Month*	Per Cent of Indians Receiving Social Assistance
Atlantic[1]	8,830	—	—[2]
Quebec[3]	27,524	11,600	42
Ontario[1]	46,316	13,900	30
Manitoba	34,644	29,300	85
Saskatchewan	32,325	25,600	79
Alberta	28,886	17,000	59
British Columbia	35,418	21,900	62
Yukon	2,197	1,300	57
Canada[5]	216,140	128,400	59[6]

* Estimated by multiplying the average monthly case unit by 3.5.

1. Exclusive of Newfoundland and also beneficiaries of the Nova Scotia Family Benefits Programme.
2. Meaningful pattern not obtainable.
3. Excludes figures for some bands especially those under the James Bay agreements.
4. Excludes beneficiaries of provincial Family Benefits Programmes.
5. Exclusive of Newfoundland and Northwest Territories.
6. Includes revised estimates for the three Maritime provinces.

Source: Statistics Canada, *Social Security National Programs: Other Programs*, Table 1, pg. 80, 1982.

2. Inadequate benefits

It would be a mistake to conclude that the collapse of the safety net (and the consequent rise of the food banks) was entirely due to the dramatic increases in unemployment and the resultant pressure created thereby in the social security system. Evidence confirmed by food bank directors across the country points to the inadequacy of social assistance benefits as the major reason why people apply to the food banks. This should come as no surprise given the numerous poverty line and cutback studies pointing to such inadequacies in the seventies and eighties.

Reports have been written by scholars, commissioners of government enquiries, national and provincial councils of social welfare and social planning, and representatives of poor people's organizations.[1] They have been reported in the media, acknowledged by government reports, digested and chewed over, and yet little or no attention has been paid to them by the politicians. Indeed, Marjorie Martin and Dennis Guest, professors of Social Work at the Universities of Victoria and British Columbia, respectively, stated recently in a joint brief that "the poor are the victims not just of poverty, but of researchers and writers. For all (the studies), the conditions of the poor have not bettered — indeed they are proving proportionately worse."[2] Their remarks are well taken. We should instead examine the wealthy who control the lives of the poor. However, one theme does emerge very clearly from the long list of poverty studies: the inadequacy of social assistance benefits is long-standing and has the most serious consequences for those in poverty.

The point of what follows is not to provide a detailed analysis of the poverty gap in Canada, that is, "the amount by which the incomes of poor families fall short of their respective poverty-level incomes."[3] The intention is rather to show that the problem remains acute in the 1980's and, as Derek Hum has pointed out, that:

> Assistance levels have remained low in spite of CAP. Generally, provision is made only for the most essential items, and in some provinces, assistance is further limited by fixed ceilings on payments set without consideration of needs or costs. With continuing inflation, the absence of statutory provisions for indexing in all but two provinces (Nova Scotia and Quebec) has further compounded problems associated with inadequate assistance.[4]

What are adequate benefits?

There are a number of ways of measuring adequacy. The approaches taken by provincial governments, the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto (SPCMT), Statistics Canada and the Canadian Council on Social Development are those most commonly emphasized in Canada. In general, their approach to the question of what constitutes an adequate income depends on assumptions about poverty. If you believe people are poor because of their own fault, you will tend to favour a "market basket" or subsistence approach. If, however, you think that poverty is generated by structural inequalities built into the fabric of capitalist society, you will favour a relative deprivation approach.

In fact, in Canada the measurements of adequacy reflect both approaches. At one end are the provincial assistance rates, based on minimum subsistence market baskets. According to the CCSD Task Force on Poverty this approach "tries to estimate an absolute level, unrelated to community standards, that is considered necessary to feed, shelter and clothe members of a household at the absolute minimum level."[5]

At the other end are the poverty lines established by the Canadian Council on Social Development. These lines reflect a relative income approach and are calculated as 50 per cent of the average (pre-tax) Canadian family income, with adjustments made for family size. In this way, more than subsistence needs are taken into account and substitute incomes are related to prevailing national standards and customary activities. It is, in short, an attempt to recognize that anti-poverty strategies must take account of social as well as physical needs.

One way, then, of showing the inadequacy of social assistance benefits is to compare the entitlements of families of different size to the poverty lines constructed by the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) and the Statistics Canada low income cut-offs.

As Table 7 shows, long term social assistance benefits for individuals and four-person families in 1983 were in general less than half of the poverty lines established by the Toronto SPC, the CCSD and the low income cut-offs, adjusted for rural and urban size by Statistics Canada. In other words, the real poverty lines are represented by the benefits paid by provincial governments.

Table 7. Four Measures of Poverty*

1983 Poverty Line		
	Family of one	Family of four
Social Assistance (Average of long term provincial rates):	$ 3,956	$ 9,860
Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto (estimated budgetary requirements):	10,145	20,455
Canadian Council on Social Development	8,625	20,125
Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-offs (rural-urban)	7,052-9,538	14,268-19,397

*Estimates of income lines derived from four different approaches:
— the implied poverty lines of provincial welfare administrations
— the Toronto Social Planning Council budget guidelines
— the CCSD poverty lines
— Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs.

Source: CCSD, *Not Enough: The Meaning and Measurement of Poverty in Canada*, Canadian Council on Social Development, 1984, p. 25.

It should also be noted that the three poverty lines used as points of comparison are hardly adequate to permit anything more than simply surviving. As the CCSD Task Force on Poverty reported, "Living on the Toronto SPC budget cannot be considered 'fancy living' by any means. It could be more appropriately described as scraping by."[6]

Given that the Toronto Social Planning Council minimum budget levels are the most generous of the three poverty lines, it goes without saying that trying to make ends meet on the basis of the CCSD or Statistics Canada calculations would be equally difficult. And it should be noted that the Statistics Canada line is the closest that the federal government comes to establishing an "official" national definition of poverty.[7]

Welfare benefits as the state poverty line:

What, therefore, must life be like for the 1.9 million people in Canada in 1984 dependent on provincial social assistance which constitutes the actual state poverty line? These benefits (hardly an appropriate term) are considered by the provinces a minimum amount below which people will not be allowed to fall. If that is the case, why is it that people are turning to food banks in droves to obtain enough to eat for themselves and their children?

Quite simply, the "market basket" approach to establishing budgets for social assistance recipients is grossly inadequate. Again, as pointed out by the CCSD Task Force, these budgets pay scant attention to needs other than food, shelter and clothing, except in special cases usually involving health problems.[8] One BC food bank director put it more bluntly when she said that "most welfare money is milked off in rents." This statement was echoed across the country. The fact that food money invariably goes toward paying the rent is one good reason why people simply cannot cope on inadequate welfare benefits.

There is ample evidence to support the claim, reported by the Task Force, that the cost of purchasing food staples set out in the Canada Food Guide such as meat, fish, poultry, cheese, juice and milk for a family of four far exceeds the food allowance provided by welfare. Furthermore, these budgets take little account of the generally higher food prices in low-income neighbourhoods, as well as in remoter regions of the provinces. As one Anglican minister in Toronto expressed the irony, "There are hungry people who need food and there is a food surplus. The problem is that people's benefits are too inadequate to purchase it."

Equally significant is that little account is taken of the social roles and obligations which people are expected to play in a society as parents, workers, relatives and friends. Sudden events like the loss of a relative and the cost of a funeral, recreational needs of sons and daughters, the need to visit friends and relations are given scant attention. Money for such activities must come from the food allowance.

Some would make the valid point that social assistance benefits are not the only source of income for people receiving monthly "welfare" cheques. That is true. Also included are federal family allowances, child tax credits, provincial tax credits and other income supplements for which welfare recipients may be eligible. From this viewpoint the adequacy of social assistance benefits can be judged in terms of a broader conception of the public safety net. This point has been addressed by the Toronto SPC in Table 8.

Table 8. Supplemented Annual Incomes of Families on Social Assistance Measured Against Poverty Lines, by Province, 1984.

	One adult plus child age 4			Two adults plus children 10 & 13		
	$ Amount	Per cent Poverty Line	Rank	$ Amount	Per cent Poverty Line	Rank
Newfoundland	8,790	76.0	1	10,751	60.1	6
P.E.I.	7,578	65.5	5	11,195	62.6	4
Nova Scotia	8,807	71.0	3	11,735	61.3	5
New Brunswick	7,314	59.0	10	8,663	45.3	10
Quebec	7,992	61.2	9	10,965	54.5	8
Ontario	8,294	63.5	7	10,321	51.3	9
Manitoba	8,183	62.6	8	13,043	64.8	3
Saskatchewan	9,247	74.6	2	13,910	72.7	1
Alberta	8,726	66.8	4	14,167	70.4	2
British Columbia	8,382	64.2	6	11,855	58.9	7

Note: Supplemented incomes include federal child-related transfers and provincial tax credits. Poverty lines are based on the "low-income cut-offs" of Statistics Canada, adjusted for the size of the largest urban centre in each province.

Source: Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, "Welfare Benefits: An Inter-Provincial Comparison." *Social Infopac*, Vol. 2, No. 4, October 1983, see Table 5, p. 5.

As this Table shows, even when we measure the supplemented annual incomes of families on social assistance against the most conservative of the poverty lines, that produced by Statistics Canada, no province comes close to meeting the federal government's low income cut-offs, regarded by many as Canada's official poverty lines. While Newfoundland and Saskatchewan come closest, even they fall 25 per cent short of the mark.

There is considerable variation in income adequacy among the provinces for families of different sizes. For single people, as Table 8 makes clear, the situation is even worse.

Benefits for single employable people (see Table 9) in all but two provinces fall 50 per cent below the poverty lines. In Quebec, single unemployed people below the age of 30 are asked to survive on $158 per month. The position of single disabled people is somewhat better but again falls far short of any sense of adequacy which would enable them to participate fully in the community.

What these statistics tell us is not so much that the public safety net has broken down but rather that it was never stitched together properly in the first place. An adequate social minimum safeguarded by full employment and economic growth never got off the ground.

Table 9. Supplemented Annual Incomes of Single Persons on Social Assistance Measured Against Poverty Lines, by Province, 1984.

	Single Person, Employable			Single person, Disabled		
	$ Amount	Per cent Poverty Line	Rank	$ Amount	Per cent Poverty Line	Rank
Newfoundland	3,168	35.9	8	5,088	57.7	7
P.E.I.	5,508	62.4	1	5,988	67.9	3
Nova Scotia	4,332	46.1	4	6,048	64.3	5
New Brunswick	1,296	13.8	10	5,112	54.4	9
Quebec	1,848	18.7	9	5,206	52.6	10
Ontario	4,435	44.8	7	6,175	62.4	6
Manitoba	4,689	47.4	3	5,445	55.0	8
Saskatchewan	4,224	44.9	6	6,564	69.8	2
Alberta	5,744	58.0	2	7,460	75.4	1
British Columbia	4,500	45.5	5	6,576	66.4	4

Note: **Supplemented incomes include federal child-related transfers and provincial tax credits. Poverty lines are based on the "low-income cut-offs" of Statistics Canada, adjusted for the size of the largest urban centre in each province.**

Source: Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, "Welfare Benefits: An Inter-Provincial Comparison." *Social Infopac*, Vol. 2, No. 4, October 1983, see Table 6, p. 25.

Not receiving the full benefit:

The problems for many people on assistance are, however, worse than even these figures show. One problem is that people do not always receive their full entitlements. For example, in British Columbia, Rob Arnold of the Federated Anti-Poverty Groups of British Columbia reports that in that province, ". . . people awaiting U.I.C. cheques are not eligible for income assistance, per se, and must apply for a 'hardship grant' which is minimal and usually doesn't include the shelter portion of regular assistance rates."[9]

In certain provinces, overpayments are regularly deducted from clients' cheques, meaning that the recipients end up with even less than their minimal entitlements. In British Columbia, this amount is deducted no matter whose fault it was. In Saskatchewan, if people receive emergency food payments or advances for other necessities, these amounts are deducted from next month's cheque.

In Alberta, the Edmonton Food Bank's careful study of that province's social allowance system noted that 64 per cent of those on assistance who were using the food bank had had their allowances reduced by recoveries.[10] Government representatives who had participated in the study reported that province-wide the figure was 31 per cent for all social allowance recipients. If the amount recovered is below $250, the client is often not notified. The report concludes, somewhat mildly, ". . . reducing benefits already designed to be a subsistence level of income is bound to create difficulties for clients."[11]

The point made is that people do not always receive what they are entitled to. In fact, people can be cut off welfare and denied a range of benefits depending on how social assistance workers use their discretionary powers in interpreting the regulations. If the emphasis is on "screening out," as it usually is in times of restraint, the client and his needs lose.

Other issues directly related to the whole question of inadequate benefits are of poor nutrition, the poverty trap and the poverty level basis of the minimum wage to which social assistance benefits are generally pegged. The idea is, of course, that no one "on welfare" should receive more benefits than the lowest-paid wage earner, to preserve a work incentive. Based on a 1981 National Council of Welfare Poverty Report, Djao notes that, except in Quebec, single parents with two or more children and couples with one or more child are better off on social assistance than making the minimum wage.[12] However, it must be remembered that social assistance rates are themselves inadequate when compared with the most conservative poverty lines. In fact, for families with only one earner working at the minimum wage of 1981 in all provinces, childless couples and two-parent families with children all earn less than the Statistics Canada poverty line by amounts ranging from $254 to $6,314 per year.[13] The general rule is that the larger the family, the larger the poverty gap. Djao also points out that, "Only single parents working for minimum wages and supporting one child in Saskatchewan and Quebec are able to rise above the poverty line, not because of minimum wages, but because of government income supplements in these two provinces."[14] In other words, pegging social assistance rates to minimum wage is a guarantee of inadequate income.

When we think of the inadequate social assistance benefits in 1984, we should remember that we are talking about 1.9 million people. Not included in this number are those completely dependent on unemployment insurance benefits, the working poor, or those relying on other meagre state benefits such as Old Age Security and Canada or Quebec Pension Plan payments. Nor should we forget that registered Indians receiving social assistance have not been included in these figures.

In 1984, there were at least 4.1 million people living in poverty in Canada. That is a conservative estimate, but even so, it means one in six of the population are trying to survive on inadequate incomes, and the numbers are rising. In the words of Leslie Bella, a University of Alberta social policy academic, the rise of food banks as a response to this situation suggests that the public basically accepts low welfare benefits.

Inadequate benefits are not the end of the story. Cutbacks have also torn great holes in the fabric of the safety net.

3. Cutbacks

a) Social assistance

Not only have social assistance benefits been inadequate in Canada but, in recent years, they have also been cut back. Social spending has been restrained in all provinces since at least the mid-seventies.[1] And income security programmes have not escaped the axe. Evidence from a number of provinces shows that benefits have been cut and eligibility criteria tightened. The emphasis is being placed on "screening out" rather than "screening in." Such policies have affected unemployment insurance claimants as well as social assistance applicants.

In British Columbia during 1983-84, Callahan reports that government cutbacks in that province's income maintenance programme (GAIN) included

> . . . a freeze on welfare rates for all recipients and a reduction in rates for some people under twenty-five . . . . Single persons and childless

> couples under twenty-five will receive $25 less per month than other individuals and, unlike some other recipients, will be unable to retain any portion of the money they may earn while on GAIN.[2]

Arnold reports further restrictions, including reduced rates for the first four months of benefits, reduced support allowances, and cutbacks of $35 per month for families with dependent children.[3]

Eligibility criteria have also been tightened. In fact, Callahan writes that "the ministry has taken other unprecedented measures to restrict eligibility for GAIN, including denying social assistance to those waiting for their UIC cheques." She notes that, "Those awaiting UIC cheques in British Columbia will now have to exhaust every possible resource: family, friends, assets, and even potential assets such as credit before qualifying for a small portion of the GAIN allowance."[4] In addition, restrictions have been placed on earnings exemptions which enable people to retain a portion of wages without a reduction in their monthly allowance rate.[5] Now recipients have to wait eight months before they qualify for exemptions. Proof of job searches is demanded more often and the programme under which volunteers could receive $50 per month has been cut. As Arnold notes, these cuts have resulted in people having "to go to soup kitchens and food banks to make it past the middle of the month."[6]

In Alberta, the situation is just as bad and, in fact, the Edmonton Food Bank has documented the link between the growing demand for its emergency food and cutbacks in social assistance in 1983 — and this after a very careful survey. Their report, is written in a very cautious style so as not to antagonize the Alberta government, which might be sensitive to charges that it is sloughing off its responsibilities. The report noted that:

> While it seemed impossible to isolate any factor as the sole cause, the increased need coincided with changes in social assistance policies instituted in July, 1983, by Alberta Social Services and Community Health. These changes included reductions in the rates paid to employable people, as well as reductions in shelter benefits. As early as September, 1983, the Food Bank expressed concern to the Minister of Social Services that there seemed to be a correlation between increased food demand and these policy changes.[7]

In June and September, 1983, a coalition of human service agencies active in the Edmonton community, working with the highly respectable Edmonton Social Planning Council, conducted surveys addressing head on the question of social assistance cuts.[8] Their second report was entitled *The Unkindest Cuts: The Impact of the Recent Social Allowance Cutbacks*. It highlighted the disruptive, damaging inappropriateness of the shelter allowance reductions; the limiting of 16 — and 17-year-olds including single mothers, to one month's social allowance, and the inadequacy of the 5 per cent increase in basic assistance for food, clothing, personal and household expenses. It noted that eligibility criteria were tightened, and single unemployed people able to work were hit particularly hard. No wonder the Edmonton Food Bank experienced increased demand.

As we move further east, the situation does not get any better. In March, 1984, the Saskatchewan Progressive Conservative government of Grant Devine introduced its so-called welfare reform package.

While these changes did include increased benefits for seniors and minimum increases for families ($5 — 10 per month), their primary objective was to promote short term job creation and training for clients capable of work but unemployed after a three-month job search. To help finance these proposals, the government reduced the benefits of people classified as "single unemployed employables" by 45 per cent from $530 after three months to $345 per month. No changes in household allowances were announced, new limits were placed on income exemptions, and more stringent screening processes were introduced. Essentially what happened was that benefits were taken from one group of poor people and given to another. It is important to note that, despite (some might say, because of) these reforms, social assistance caseloads have continued to rise in the province. So has demand for food from the food bank.

It is clear that the cutbacks introduced in the 1980's by conservative-minded governments in Western Canada share many things: rental reductions, cuts to single unemployed employables, restrictions on those waiting for unemployment insurance payments, cuts in earnings and income and asset exemptions, denial of 16- and 17-year-olds' rights to assistance, and increased emphasis on endless and physically and emotionally exhausting job searches. "Blaming the victim" is an overused term, but because of its harsh application by provincial governments, it will be around for a long time to come.

The Maritimes and Central Canada have suffered similar social assistance cutback policies. In Quebec, social spending cutbacks have been a fact of life since 1976.[9] Perhaps the best way of indicating the impact of restraint over time is to note the comments about Ontario social assistance benefits in the 1983 Metro Toronto Social Planning Council report, *". . . And the Poor Get Poorer."* The authors comment that welfare programmes became less of a financial priority in the latter half of the seventies. Although income maintenance expenditures did increase from 4.0 per cent to 4.3 per cent of total government expenditures between 1979-80 and 1983-84, this increase is misleading. Social welfare caseloads in Ontario since 1975-76 grew by more than 35 per cent, resulting in the increased spending being spread more thinly.[10] In fact, the report points out the extent to which increases in monthly benefit rates were curtailed between 1975 and 1983. "By the end of 1983, the cost of living will have increased by more than 100 per cent since 1975. By contrast, monthly benefits on General Welfare have been raised only 41.4 per cent, while benefits on Family Benefits — GAINS-D are up only 52.8 per cent during the same period. And the gap continues to widen."[11]

Ontario's situation is symptomatic of the impact of restraint. Indeed, the social democratic government in Manitoba has not acted on the recommendations of the Manitoba Task Force on Social Assistance commissioned by the NDP Government to examine the welfare system in that province.[13] While the report contained many progressive ideas for reform, its recommendation regarding the adequacy of benefits was limited and cautious. It simply argued that benefits should be a fixed proportion of the low-income cut-off.[14] Nothing, however, has changed. Restraint as a philosophy prevails.

b) Unemployment insurance

Cutbacks and stricter eligibility requirements have also seriously eroded rights to unemployment insurance. The first complete revision of Canada's unemployment insurance programme since the 1940's took place with the introduction of the *Unemployment Insurance Act* in 1971. The premise of the new Act was "that for all wage and salary earners, social insurance should provide financial support in the event of unemployment."[15] This Act eased qualifying conditions for benefits and widened compulsory coverage. Benefits were raised to two-thirds of the contributor's wage; temporary sickness, disability (after a two-week waiting period) and pregnancy were included; the qualifying period was lowered to eight weeks for those claiming regular benefits, and claimants were to be channeled to employment and training programmes. As Struthers notes, "With the 1971 reforms, unemployment insurance became in fact, if not in name, a welfare scheme with an explicit redistributive function."[16]

Many of the reforms were short-lived. As Struthers again reminds us:

> . . . the 1970's produced what most economists predicted would not happen again — long term, large scale unemployment combined with double digit inflation which has seemingly defied any easy Keynesian remedy . . . . The state's definition of full employment has steadily incorporated ever higher levels of joblessness . . . . In response, unemployment insurance benefits have been reduced and eligibility requirements stiffened, even though the percentage of those without work has reached a level unprecedented since the Great Depression.[17]

Policies to screen out claimants and reduce benefits have included raising the qualifying period from eight to between 10 and 14 weeks, (within the previous 52 weeks) depending on the regional unemployment rate (1977). The qualifying period was further increased for repeaters (persons with claims in the preceding 52 weeks) by six more weeks for regular benefits (1979).[18] In 1976 the benefit rate was first reduced from 75 per cent of insurable earnings for beneficiaries with dependents to 66 2/3 per cent, the rate for all other claimants. Then in 1979 the rate was further cut for everyone to 60 per cent.[19] Training, work sharing and job creation programmes have increased, but it is interesting to note (see Table 10) that the number of unemployment insurance claimants enrolled in these programmes declined from six to four per cent of total beneficiaries between 1983 and 1984.

Table 10. Changes in UIC Training, Worksharing and Job Creation Cases Compared to Regular Benefits, March 1981-84.

UIC Cases	March 1981	March 1982	March 1983	March 1984
Regular Benefits	740,816	1,017,375	1,344,906	1,234,835
Training, Worksharing and Job Creation	32,588[1]	35,135[1]	77,794[2]	55,719[3]
Total	773,404	1,052,510	1,422,700	1,290,554
Proportion of Total	4.2%	3.3%	5.5%	4.3%

1. Training
2. Training and worksharing
3. Training, worksharing and job creation

Source: 1981 to 1984 — *Statistical Report on the Operation of the Unemployment Insurance Act*, April-June, 73-001, Quarterly.

These cutbacks, coupled with the dramatically-expanded unemployment insurance rolls, amply demonstrate the breakdown of a key part of Canada's public safety net in the late seventies and early eighties. Life was made more difficult for the 1.4 million people unemployed. Social insurance that would adequately safeguard people against the hardships of joblessness was seen by many as an empty promise. And Guest's 1980 prediction came true: as the government made it more difficult for people to qualify for unemployment insurance, and cut their benefits, so welfare rolls rose. In fact, in Western Canada they more than rose; they exploded.

Rapidly escalating unemployment insurance and social assistance caseloads, inadequate benefits, cutbacks and more stringent eligibility criteria have all conspired to undermine Canada's public safety net in the 1980's. However, while the federal government moved to restrict unemployment insurance, it also turned a blind eye to the administration of social assistance programmes by the provinces. It is to this issue that we now turn.

4. The federal blind eye

Further evidence of the collapse of the safety net has been the failure of the federal government to ensure that the provinces adhere to the cost-sharing conditions of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP). Given that half the costs of all provincial social assistance programmes are paid by federal funds, and that the provinces' receipt of this money is governed by a number of legislated conditions, the federal government must, along with the provinces, clearly be held accountable for the breakdown of the welfare system.

Provincial governments have the constitutional power to direct and manage social assistance programmes in Canada; nevertheless, the federal government, through the Canada Assistance Plan (1966), enjoys not only legislative authority exercised by the Parliament of Canada, but also enormous spending power. He who pays the piper calls the tune — or so one might expect.

The Canada Assistance Plan, introduced in 1966 on a wave of cooperative federalism, was, according to Hum, expected to achieve a number of aims: "better and more comprehensive coverage for those in need of assistance, including the working poor; increased opportunities for the unemployed through vocational rehabilitation and upgrading of skills; and the consolidation (within provinces) of assistance programs."[1]

The conditions of cost-sharing:

Most significantly, though, Ottawa agreed to meet half of all provincial social assistance costs regardless of the circumstances which put recipients in need.[2] This permitted the provinces to develop general public assistance programmes for the first time.[3] However, the cost-shared nature of the funding meant that the provinces had to spend this money on welfare programmes and were required to meet certain conditions. As the Parliamentary Task Force on Fiscal Federalism in Canada expressed it in 1981, "What Parliament buys with federal taxpayers' money are the "conditions" that provinces must meet in order to obtain CAP funds (aside from the sharing of risks and the incentive toward development implicit in cost-sharing)."[4]

According to the legislation, the conditions are that provinces must:

1. Provide basic assistance to any person in need regardless of cause.
2. Determine need on the basis of a needs test that takes into account an individual's budgetary requirements (food, shelter, etc.) and the income and resources available to meet them.
3. Not require a period of residence in the province as a condition of eligibility.
4. Provide by law a formal appeals procedure which requires a right of appeal to a social assistance applicant or recipient.
5. Exchange financial and statistical information as may be required for the administration of the Act.

These conditions are widely acknowledged and understood by the authorities, although there is much evidence that the provinces do not keep to their part of the bargain and that the federal government turns a blind eye. Hum makes telling points when he writes that:

> Provincial autonomy with respect to social programs seriously undermines several of CAP's major objectives. The Plan's aim has been to develop a system that would emphasise the right to benefits, raise levels of assistance, broaden coverage and help the unemployed re-enter and remain in the work force. But provincial programs have generally maintained a categorical approach (frequently classifying recipients as employable or unemployable to separate classes of beneficiaries for different treatment), established maximum levels of assistance, and denied access to the working poor.[5]

The federal commitment to adequacy:

However, as Guest notes, it is the adequacy of assistance rates that has continued to be a cause of great concern.[6] This is the central issue. The inadequacy of provincial social assistance benefits raises the whole question of the role of the federal government in interpreting and enforcing (or not enforcing) the conditions of CAP.

While the concept of adequacy is not specifically expressed as one of the five conditions for cost-sharing, it is quite explicit in the preamble to the legislation, and in the legal definition of a person in need, that the Parliament of Canada intended its cost-shared federal dollars to provide adequate benefits.

The preamble to the CAP (1966) legislation, recognizes that "the provision of *adequate* assistance to and in respect of persons in need and the prevention and removal of the causes of poverty and dependence on public assistance are the concerns of all Canadians . . . ." It further defines a person in need as someone:

> . . . who by reason of inability to obtain employment, loss of the principal family provider, illness, disability, age or other cause acceptable to the provincial authority, is found to be unable (on the basis of a test established by the provincial authority that takes into account the person's budgetary requirements and the income and resources available to him to meet such requirements) to provide *adequately* for himself, or for himself and his dependent or any of them . . . .[7] (Author's emphasis)

In other words, both the spirit of the legislation expressed in the preamble and the letter of the law stated in a key clause of the act establish the principle of adequacy. Why, then, has the federal government continued to avert its gaze as year after year provincial benefits fall far short of even the most conservative poverty lines? While it is true the provinces have constitutional jurisdiction over their spending and can determine social assistance benefit levels, the situation is not as sharply defined when it comes to federal spending. Indeed, the federal government has not only a legislated mandate but its vast spending power to back its position. These powers, interestingly, were used by Minister of Health and Welfare Monique Begin when she sought to protect medicare from being undermined by direct billing and privatization by Canada's doctors. The new *Canada Health Act* which effectively outlawed extra billing by levying financial penalities on the provinces, was the result. Ottawa decided to use its moral authority.

Some would suggest that the federal government is reluctant to act because it lacks an operational definition of adequacy, or because municipal governments in Ontario, Manitoba and Nova Scotia still retain too much local control over deciding amounts granted.[8] Certainly, the move to adequate assistance rates has not been helped by the 50%/50% cost-sharing formula in the poorer provinces, as Guest notes the trap for these provinces is that before they receive one dollar, they first have to spend money themselves. Guest maintains that Canada lacks the necessary studies to defend an appropriate standard of living supported by social assistance; and that we live with the ever-present fear that higher welfare rates might undermine the work incentive.[9]

But how conclusive are such arguments?

Surely, what is also lacking is the moral authority and political will to assert the notion of territorial justice; that is, the right of all Canadians, wherever they might live, to adequate incomes and accessible, high-quality social services for themselves and their children. If it is possible for the state to defend the health care rights of all Canadians, why not also their entitlement to adequate incomes? Is it because a low level of social assistance is an important device for maintaining social control?

Indian social assistance:

The situation is perhaps seen more clearly in terms of Indian social assistance. As Djao writes: "There is no legislation, federal or provincial, specifically governing the provision of social assistance and services to the Indian population"[10] living on reserve and Crown land. The Canada Assistance Plan does in fact provide for federal funding of provincial assistance on the same basis as for non-Indians, but no province has ever signed an agreement on this matter.[11] Administrative decree, expressed through the annual federal *Appropriations Act* and the Treasury Board and administered through the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, governs the adequacy of assistance to status Indians.[12] As Djao comments:

> Evidence of social control in assistance to Indians is apparent even to the casual observer. Social control is exerted over the Indians on assistance not only through the principle of "less eligibility," a condition shared by Indian and non-Indian recipients alike, but also through inconsistent appeal procedures; the absence of independent appeal procedures on some Indian reserves; the forced low-wage employment in seasonal work; varying standards for determining eligibility for "special needs" funds; and general impoverishment for Indians.[13]

The point is that federal jurisdiction over the welfare of Indian people is assured, yet the adequacy of the system is indefensible. Is it any wonder, then, that when it comes to progressive criticisms of provincial social assistance programmes the federal government looks the other way?

Suffice it to say that the federal government has permitted the erosion of Canadian social rights and legally enforceable claims to adequate assistance. It has permitted this situation by choosing to ignore the overall intention of the Canada Assistance Plan to provide adequate benefits, but also by failing to enforce its conditions. It has not actively sought to promote high national standards and, in assistance for Indians, it has consistently looked the other way.

The poverty trap:

Is it any wonder that people either find themselves enmeshed in the welfare net or fall right through it? For many the public safety net is not a haven of last resort, but a poverty trap from which it is difficult to escape. This occurs for many despite the Canada Assistance Plan's intent to prevent and remove the causes of poverty and dependence on public assistance. Two particular aspects of this trap are worth noting: the specific welfare rules and regulations which make it difficult to regain independence, and the appeal boards' ineffectiveness in guaranteeing the right to assistance.

Ryant, writing about enforced dependency created by social assistance programmes, notes the requirements that personal resources must be exhausted before benefits are granted, the impact of subsistence living on the next generation and insufficient training and social support programmes.[14] He is particularly critical of the way benefit reduction rates penalize those who are able to work but cannot earn enough to be totally self-supporting. As he says, dollar for dollar reduction rates amount to a 100 per cent tax rate, something which is not applied to those who are fully employed. In other words, the lowest income earners are taxed at higher rates than the most affluent, even though they are attempting to work. Ryant also sees overmanagement of eligibility and benefit structures as conducive to the poverty trap. If people are better off "on welfare," it should be no surprise.

Another reason people become ensnared by the system and dependent on its regulations is the ineffectiveness of the appeal system. The right to appeal benefit decisions forms part of the cost-sharing of CAP. However, as long ago as 1971, the Senate Committee on Poverty commented that, ". . . generally speaking, appeal boards seem to be treated as extensions of provincial welfare departments, and not in any way as independent entities. They are naturally geared to act in the interests of the welfare system, and not in the interests of the welfare recipient."[15]

In the early seventies, The Canadian Civil Liberties Education Trust undertook a cross-Canada survey of the welfare practices in provincial social assistance programmes. On the subject of the appeal mechanisms, they were sharply critical, noting that:

> This new machinery is a long way from functioning with the minimum adequacy required by common law standards of procedural fairness. Large numbers of welfare recipients are unaware that such machinery even exists. In some of the tribunals, former welfare officials appear to exert a substantial influence, thereby depriving the process of the appearance of impartiality.[16]

By the 1980's, the situation did not appear to have changed for the better. The Legal Aid Lawyers' Association of Manitoba, in its brief to the Parliamentary Task Force, claimed that "the appeal procedure is in danger of becoming 'a frustrating and meaningless exercise for the appellant' in many provinces."[17] They added that the federal government and the provinces have never made a mutual effort to define more precisely what constitutes an appeals procedure.[18] This is somewhat surprising, given that the federal and provincial governments conduct yearly reviews of the appeal process.

The point once again is that, under the terms of CAP, the federal government should ensure that provincial appeal systems are working to protect the rights of clients. For these clients, this is the only real avenue of appeal.

Attempts at reform in the 1960's and 1970's:

It is true that attempts were made in 1968-71 and 1973-77 to review and reform social security policy in Canada. The first effort, culminating in the Victoria Conference of 1971, was concerned with broad constitutional change. However, it became bogged down in the question of Quebec's sovereignty in matters of social policy, including family and youth allowances, unemployment insurance and the guaranteed income supplement to pensions.[19] Compromises were proposed by the federal government, but no agreements were reached. Unfortunately, little attention was paid to the guaranteed annual income proposals contained in the Senate Committee's "Poverty Report" and the "Real Poverty Report." The first proposal was based on the idea of negative income tax and the latter suggested a demogrant approach. Changes were made in old age benefits and unemployment insurance following the introduction of a federal white paper on Income Security in 1970. The major impetus for change, however, came in the form of the 1973 Federal-Provincial Review of Social Security. In fact, once again, little was delivered.

Health and Welfare Minister Marc Lalonde's Orange Paper addressed unemployment, inadequate incomes resulting from low wages or intermittent employment, lack of work incentives, variation of benefits in programmes, lack of coordination, and the stigma of needs testing and social assistance. It identified five strategies for dealing with these problems: employment for the hard to employ, social insurance in terms of pension, income supplements for those unable to seek paid work and for the working poor, a social services strategy for the handicapped and single parents including counselling, training and job creation, and a federal government role in setting national standards while recognizing provincial variations.[20]

Little of a comprehensive or planned strategy, however, came of these federal-provincial initiatives. Perhaps it was just as well, as many of the income supplement proposals sought to redesign programmes for the poor by re-emphasizing the cause of need.[21] The old doctrine of less eligibility was once more emphasized and had, in fact, been reinforced in recent years by provincial social assistance and job creation programmes. As Guest has argued, "The lesson from the history of social security that Canadians seem unwilling to learn is that the goal of ensuring access with dignity to a reasonable level of income or services is approached only when the problem has been defined in terms other than the wholly negative concept of poverty."[22]

While family allowance benefits were increased from $7.21 per child per month to an average of $20 and were made taxable, and the refundable child tax credit was introduced in 1978, there was a most striking omission from the agenda of the Social Security Review: the inadequacy of provincial social assistance benefits. It was as if, when all other alternatives had failed, the actual amounts received by people were not a significant question. It was a bad omen for the early 1980's, when high inflation, soaring interest rates and escalating unemployment made their full impact on the country's public safety net. Inevitably, the federal policy of turning a blind eye created the conditions in which the safety net collapsed and food banks emerged.

Given the fact that the safety net never guaranteed an adequate social assistance minimum and that for some it became a trap instead of a cushion, it could be argued that the net never existed in the first instance. If that was the case, how could it collapse? This is an important but nonetheless academic consideration.

Two points should be made. For those who stand in social assistance or U.I. lines and are denied benefits, or whose benefits are withheld by administrative delays, the net does not exist. For them it has indeed collapsed. A similar experience befalls those whose cheques do not last the month and who cannot afford to put bread on the table. For them the food banks are the only alternative.

Second, it is clear that CAP and existing provincial social assistance programmes do provide legislation intended to guarantee adequate benefits for people in need. At the most basic level, they are meant to ensure that people are able to eat. A subsistence level of living is guaranteed. This is not simple and well-meaning rhetoric; rather, it is the law of the land. As noted earlier, CAP sets some important anti-poverty goals and seeks to establish certain national standards. In addition, provincial social assistance legislation also addresses the question of need. It is the commitment to such policies which has collapsed in recent years.

International treaties and obligations:

It should be noted that Canada is a signatory to at least two international conventions which guarantee the right to social security. Article 22 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) expresses this commitment. In 1976, the federal government, after reaching agreement with the provinces, signed the U.N.'s *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. Article 11 of this covenant reads, "The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an *adequate* standard of living for himself and his family, including *adequate* food, clothing and housing, and to continuous improvements of his living conditions."[23] (Author's emphasis.)

The interesting point about this convention is the concurrence of the provinces in signing it. This clearly implies their commitment to ensuring adequate benefits. If provincial governments are sovereign in establishing benefit levels then they do have a clear commitment and standard to uphold. It is a matter the federal government should remind them about. Not only does this commitment exist in CAP but it is also clearly stated in the 1976 agreement. The irony, of course, is that the year 1976 marked a commitment to restraint by a number of provinces and by the federal government.

The 1980's: The Charter and the Nielsen Report:

Whether the government of Canada will continue to turn a blind eye to the question of adequate incomes and benefits remains to be seen. Attempts will certainly be made to use the *Charter of Rights* to ensure the rights of individuals to adequate standards of living.[24] In particular, one can expect groups promoting human dignity to use the provisions dealing with freedom of association (2), the right to life, liberty and security of person (7), protection against cruel and unusual punishment (12) and equality rights (15). How successful such actions will be is difficult to say.

If history is any guide, the federal government, or indeed the provinces, cannot be expected to join that same side. It even seems too much to expect the federal government to adequately police its own cost-sharing conditions. The evidence for this gloomy prediction can be found in the recently-released (March, 1986) Federal Government report on the Canada Assistance Plan.[25] This was one of the 26 studies prepared by Deputy Prime Minister Erik Nielsen's Task Force into efficiency and restraint in government spending. Nielsen holds out little hope for those who would like to see the federal government ensure adequate benefits by making certain that the provinces meet the cost- sharing conditions. Interestingly, the report does recognize that CAP is a national "safety net" and the programme of last resort for those Canadians unable to participate in other federal income programmes. However, Nielsen nimbly avoids his federal responsibilities by claiming that it is up to the provinces to serve this group. His argument is that "the actual extent of assistance depends on the financial ability of the individual provinces."[26] Once again, constitutional arguments are employed to allow the federal government to turn a blind eye to the plight of its poorest citizens. Of course, the international obligations of the federal government and the provinces to ensure adequacy are forgotten.

The real problem with the Nielsen report is not simply that restraint and efficiency are its bedrock principles. Rather, it is the conclusion which should be questioned — namely "that CAP is an effective federal/provincial partnership for the alleviation of the effects of poverty throughout Canada."[27] How is it, then, that hundreds of thousands of hungry Canadians are lining up at the food banks? Nielsen briefly recognizes the existence of food banks in his report but is more concerned that the costs of CAP benefits are "not collectively excessive as long as they remain affordable to Canada."[28] In other words, the Deputy Prime Minister is saying that CAP is not costing us too much and therefore the programme is working, despite some concerns about increasing caseloads due to unemployment. The real message, then, is to get the caseload down "if this can be accomplished at an acceptable level of cost."[29] Whether people are able to avoid hunger is not the priority issue for this or previous federal administrations, at least since 1966.

What needs to be done, of course, is that the federal government must define what it means by adequacy. Provincial governments have already done this through the benefits they pay. As has been noted earlier, these benefits are mean and punitive and fail to recognize the costs of providing nutritious food. In other words, adequacy must be urgently addressed, as a concept and a practical measure which meets the legislative and international commitments of the Parliament of Canada.

5. Why the Collapse?

The reason for the collapse of the commitment to the public safety net lies deeper than the way federal ministries and provincial social service departments respond to the crisis of long-term unemployment. The fact that unemployment insurance had been designed to cope with only short term interruptions to earnings, and that the patchwork quilt of provincial social assistance programmes could not guarantee minimum standards of living, are not in themselves sufficient explanation for the breakdown of income security in Canada in the 1980's.

A fuller explanation of this breakdown must deal with structural and ideological causes, particularly the neo-conservative values increasingly espoused by all governments in Canada since the mid-seventies. The conservative philosophy has formed the basis for the attack on the welfare state. Whether we understand this attack, as suggested by Moscovitch,[1] to be an outright assault on social rights of the kind executed in 1983 by Bennett in British Columbia, or a restructuring of welfare state activities since the mid-seventies more akin to a gradual decline, it is clear that the breakdown of the public safety net is correlated with the rise of neo-conservative policies.

The explanation for the collapse is seen as primarily ideological. Technological, demographic and other forces have helped to create large scale unemployment. What matters is how the state responds to the social and economic dislocation of these structural determinants. All social and economic policies rest on values and assumptions. To spend or not to spend tax revenues on particular policies or programmes is a decision which reflects political priorities. Spending is choosing. It is important when seeking explanations to expose those often unspoken values, confront the issues and understand the real choices.

The struggle for the welfare state:

Economic growth, full employment and a commitment to a social minimum were the bedrock upon which the Canadian welfare state was built between the end of World War II and the seventies. Welfare was, however, to be achieved largely through full employment. As the economy expanded, so too did federal and provincial social programmes, led by Keynesian liberal approaches to economic and social policy.

The views of the rugged individualists who wanted nothing to do with government intervention in the market place turned in favour of the modified individualists[2] who recognized the need for some forms of compensation. While both groups remained committed to competitive capitalism and its values of liberty, inequality and individualism, it was a commitment to safeguarding the human face of capitalism presented by Leonard Marsh and other social reformers of the 1940's which gradually gained ascendancy. A compensatory and interventionist role for government, coupled with a commitment to social spending as social investment, were key. The belief that all citizens should be provided with a minimum of social security was advanced.[3] The view that government should let the market run unfettered, and that public relief should be offered only when the family and private market had broken down, was pushed into the background.

A word of caution is, however, in order. We should take note of Calmain's salutory reminder of the social control functions of many social security programmes, including social insurance and family allowance. He writes, "We minimize the political reluctance to initiate the programs in the first place and we overestimate their security."[4] In many ways, then Canada's welfare state and its public safety net could be seen largely as handmaidens to the economy.

Canada's welfare state expanded slowly and in piecemeal fashion. By the early 1970's, the major elements of a modern welfare state were in place: universal health care, primary and secondary education and a range of selective social services, including child welfare, legal aid, home care and housing. In addition, major income security programmes were established. They comprised universal family allowances and old age security, social insurance programmes such as workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, the Canada and Quebec pension plans and a number of selective cash transfer programmes: old age security, guaranteed income supplement and the Canada Assistance Plan. Minimum wage policies were enacted in all jurisdictions of the country, and child tax credits were introduced in the late seventies.

Certainly, Canada's welfare state was not simply the outcome of the humanitarianism of certain progressive liberal thinkers and their political parties. Social democratic thinking also played a part, with its commitment to a positive role for the state and its emphasis upon the importance of citizenship rights, redistribution, altruism and community.[5] This thinking was perhaps best exemplified by Saskatchewan's introduction of medicare in 1962, a policy adopted by the federal government in 1965. Although great strides were made in raising standards of living, relative poverty was not abolished and redistribution had little impact upon inequality.

Conflict perspectives:

There are other less benevolent explanations why poverty did not succumb to the consensus politics seen as guiding the development of Canada's welfare state. Certainly, full employment was never really achieved and the social minimum was not attained. From a conflict perspective, it can be shown that such welfare programmes were instrumental in serving the needs of capital, and in maintaining a docile labour force. In fact, it has been demonstrated that competing welfare systems were created to serve different classes and occupational groups: corporate welfare through tax write-offs for industry and its shareholders, hidden welfare through tax expenditures for the rich, occupational welfare through job benefits for the employed, and social welfare through public social services and cash benefits for the impoverished. Some programmes, like education, health care and family allowances were certainly of benefit to all, but the fact remains that selectivity, rather than universality, was the guiding principle.

This conflict theory also suggests it would be a gross mistake to assume that social security programmes and a minimum public safety net came about without an immense struggle on the part of labour and the working class. The Winnipeg strike in 1919, organized to demand the right to collective bargaining and to a living wage, was crushed. Two workers were shot dead and 30 were seriously injured.[6]

The On-to-Ottawa Trek spurred by the failure of the Department of National Defence's relief camps, resulted in unemployed workers being fired on in the Regina Riot of 1935. The Trek symbolized, as Struthers suggests, the profound opposition to Prime Minister Bennett's relief policies in the 1930's and the reality of social unrest.[7] Indeed, Bennett's unsuccessful attempt to introduce an Employment and Social Insurance Act in 1935 was designed to placate an unruly work force. Bennett, his cabinet and some sections of the business community feared the communist-inspired leadership of the unemployed.[8] The conclusion drawn by Struthers was that, "When King finally pushed for speedy passage of the Unemployment Insurance Act, it was out of fear of post-war unrest."[9]

In like manner, Finkel sees the origins of the welfare state in Canada as "devised by governments that wished to preserve the power of the ruling class but saw that power threatened by working class militancy directed against an economic system that seemed unable to provide jobs or security."[10] He also makes the telling point that municipalities were forced to open up the public purse to provide financial relief as

> . . . the result of well-organized and generally communist-led campaigns of the unemployed workers in the major municipalities. Supported by trade unionists, the massed unemployed presented the spectre of a revolt of the workers to the frightened pillars of communities in charge of municipal councils. The councils were forced to grant more relief, often at the price of defaulting on the cities' debts.[11]

While business gradually came to accept the need for unemployment insurance and extensive social programmes, there has been recent and mounting opposition to social spending cutbacks, most visible in the formation of the Solidarity Coalition in British Columbia. This opposition continues to act as a strong reminder that conflict has been critical in determining the kind of welfare state that has emerged in Canada. In other words, Canada's welfare state was born as much out of conflict as from a sense of consensus, humanitarianism and cooperative federalism.

As Djao suggests, Marxist theory explains the welfare state as arising from three contradictions.[12] First, there is the conflict between the role of the capitalist state, which seeks to protect and further the interests of the economically dominant class, and the attention it must pay to other, less powerful classes to maintain stability and the status quo. The dominant class is driven not only by the need to accumulate and amass private wealth, but also by the need to legitimate its profits. Second, as it concedes welfare to its citizens, this is seen as a victory of the working class. Third, at the same time that these social programmes (e.g., unemployment insurance and social assistance) are designed to act as measures of social control and ways to labour discipline, they are received as benefits and come to be accepted as social rights. While welfare state spending is designed to safeguard existing relations of production, they also usher in a set of rising expectations. These can only be met, according to the "trickle down" theory, if the engine rooms of growth are working at full steam. If growth and full employment are switched off, then a fiscal crisis of the state emerges in which the conflicts between the needs, social rights and rising expectations of citizens, and the private interests of the owners of capital, become more sharply focussed. Social spending is held to be too high and no longer affordable. Restraint and cutbacks become the new order of the day. This thinking calls into question the very legitimacy of the welfare state.

The 1970's, the rise of neo-conservatism:

This is precisely what happened in 1973. Canada's welfare state, which until then had been in an expansionary mood, suddenly confronted obstacles in the way of its almost inexorable progress. Following the OPEC crisis of 1973, Canada's peripheral economy had to face rapidly escalating oil prices, slower rates of growth; and increasing inflation, interest rates and unemployment. Competition from abroad also intensified.

In response to this crisis, a battle for the minds of Canadians emerged between the rugged individualists (or anti-collectivists) on the one hand and the modified individualists (or reluctant collectivists) on the other. The ideas of the reluctant collectivists (and certainly of social democrats) were cast aside, gradually at first, but then with increasing fervour by the federal government and certain provincial governments, particularly British Columbia. Rugged individualism, in the guise of neo-conservatism, fanned into life by Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Reagan in the United States and the Fraser Institute and Premier Bennett in British Columbia, came to dominate economic and social policy thinking in Canada. Then Brian Mulroney and the Progressive Conservatives came to power on September 4, 1984.

The point should be made that it is too simplistic to equate rugged individualism with the Progressive Conservatives and modified individualism with the Liberals. Trudeau certainly introduced neo-conservative ideas and supported the Bank of Canada from 1975 onwards in its conservative monetary policy. He also had other matters on his mind, such as separatism in Quebec and his longstanding commitment to repatriate the constitution. Indeed, it could be argued that his interest in constitutional issues ultimately meant that economic and social policy issues were placed on the back burner.

Neo-conservatism has been largely responsible for the collapse of the public safety net in Canada by rejecting Keynesianism and calling into question the legitimacy of the welfare state. According to Resnick [13] this amounted to direct attack on the postwar consensus. To the apostles of the right, private interests and private enterprise had to be accorded the highest priority if Canada's ailing economy was to be put back on track. The central ideas of neo-conservatism can clearly be seen in Canadian economic and social policy since the mid-seventies, and these ideas have had a direct and profound impact on social welfare programmes.

Resnick sees three different but complementary elements running through neo-conservative thought. First, people's "excessive" expectations are seen to be a threat to representative government. Hence government's role should be reduced, rights diminished and more traditional values such as authority and obedience reinstituted. Second, the state should espouse laissez-faire policies and reject interventionism; demand management of the economy should give way to supply side economics; deregulation, privatization and strict limits on government spending should be imposed; and the pursuit of balanced budgets should be the central guiding obsession. Third, traditional concepts of morality and religion should be asserted to control the permissiveness of modern society resulting from excessively liberal attitudes. School prayers, the sacredness of pregnancy, law and order, and anti-communism are the four foundations of the good society.[14]

The impact of neo-conservatism:

From the mid-seventies on in Canada, such thinking began to influence government policy at all levels. In 1975, Trudeau promoted the psychology of restraint with the introduction of the Anti-Inflation Board (designed primarily to control wages) and social spending cutbacks. In two fireside chats to the nation, he asked us all to dampen our expectations.

Bennett's onslaught on the people of British Columbia in 1983 had a similar message but was, as we know, introduced in a far more draconian fashion. The style was different, but the message the same: people had to learn to make do with less. More critically, as McNiven has observed, the B.C. government promotes the belief:

> . . . that under a Welfare State ideology an economy becomes unmanageable and the people ungovernable. More precisely, within an adversary model of culture, created by professionals whose vested interests are supported by individuals who are the product of the "higher education for everyone" left-liberal creed, traditional steering mechanisms of the state cannot cope any longer with the growing demands of rising expectations.[15]

In the pursuit of balanced budgets, inflation was targeted as the enemy and unemployment was allowed to grow. After interest rates had been allowed to rise to intolerable levels, they then became the target. Once again, unemployment was disregarded. Then, when the new Mulroney government was voted into office, it saw its primary objective[16] as the limitation and ultimate reversal of the growth in the public debt. Deficits were seen as the chief obstacles to private sector growth, and investment by the private sector was seen as the key to restoring the economic and social health of Canada. The race to create balanced budgets was on, and privatization, which had been increasingly espoused by provincial governments since the late seventies became the new watchword.

Strict limits on government social spending have also been the order of the day in Canada since at least the mid-seventies. Cutbacks have been introduced in all provinces and by all levels of government. No social services have remained untouched. Social spending has been eroded, Moscovitch[17] informs us, by the use of more selectivity or means testing of benefits; by increases in premiums and users' fees; and by increased privatization and cost control measures. The reasons for such measures have been the all-too-ready acceptance of the neo-conserative view that social spending in Canada is too high and that it is the major contributor to the deficit. In other words, if it is not to be a brake on economic development, social spending must be reduced.

It does not matter that the basic assumption is incorrect. Canada, when compared to the seven major OECD countries, is only a middle rank spender on social security. Figures for 1981 show that Canada's social expenditure as a percentage of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) was 21.7 per cent, only marginally above the United States (21.0 per cent) and Japan (17.5 per cent). Compared to nineteen western industrial nations, Canada placed twelfth. Again, in terms of its annual growth rate of real social expenditure, Canada's record of 2.9 per cent between 1975 and 1981 was only slightly ahead of West Germany, which placed last at 1.9 per cent of the major OECD group and eleventh of all nineteen countries.[18] If we look more specifically at Canada's spending on social security transfers in 1981 as a percentage of GDP compared to the other members of the top OECD club, Canada placed last at 10.2 per cent. The average for the seven members — the U.S., Japan, West Germany, France, the U.K., Italy and Canada — was 13.6 per cent. Indeed, between 1960 and 1981 Canada's spending only grew by 2.2 per cent and was overtaken by the U.S., the U.K. and Japan.[19] It is difficult to maintain the argument that Canada is a high social spender.

This is not to suggest that the costs of social security have not been rising. As the International Labour Organization has pointed out, the maturing of programmes, social and demographic change, the rising costs of health care and unemployment are generally regarded as major structural causes of increased expenditures.[20] However, if governments make us believe that our social spending is too high particularly on account of public intervention, then restraint and cutbacks are the consequence. We then question the legitimacy of the very services, imperfect though they may be, we have struggled to create.

The private sector led recovery:

The overall intent of neo-conservative policy is clear. It is to create the conditions in which the private market can operate freely and without government interference. Unfettered individualism, which promotes private initiative and private enterprise, is required. The result, so their pundits say, will be investment for private sector growth, job creation and the rejuvenation of the economy. The best guarantee of the nation's welfare is for each person to be responsible for his or her own welfare. It is inherently, morally good to be self-reliant. In fact, "self is good, government is bad" is a value statement of neo-conservative beliefs, independent of any relation to the outcome of that statement.[21] This view in large measure explains both the attack on, and the neglect of, the public safety net in Canada in recent years. Nor should it be forgotten that these arguments which have severe consequences for women as the major recipients of welfare, hide essentially patriarchal attitudes.

The reasoning is as follows: to pursue free market policies, labour power must be broken and wages must be held down. One time-honoured way of disciplining labour is through the "doctrine of less eligibility." This means making sure public relief benefits (social assistance and even unemployment insurance) are kept so low, and their receipt rendered so unacceptable, that people will prefer to remain at work, even at jobs having wages below the poverty line. In this way, both the work ethic, and perhaps more important, the productivity ethic, are reinforced. In other words, the central logic of neo-conservativism leads inevitably to the collapse of a publicly and adequately financed safety net. People must learn to stand on their own two feet and help themselves: state welfare simply creates and prolongs public dependency, which is morally bad and indefensible.

Seen in this light, the rise of voluntarism and the privatization of essential social services in Canada, expressed in the development of food banks, should come as no surprise. The question is whether voluntarism and food banking are adequate to the tasks facing them and what roles they can play in dealing with the reality of mass hunger across the country.

Notes

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III

THE POLITICS OF FOOD BANKS: VOLUNTARISM AS A WAY OUT?

A. *Food Banks as Political Activities*

Are food banks good or not? Should they continue to be supported or allowed to die? Who benefits most from them: the hungry, the food producers, the churches and NGO's, politicians, or the state? These are critical questions as food banks become institutionalized and affect the way the public system of social welfare operates in Canada.

Answering these questions is not easy, precisely because the existence of food banks engages such a wide range of social and economic policy issues, including the role of the state in guaranteeing standards of living, the rights of Canadians to adequate wages and income support, the breakdown of the public safety net, waste and profit-making in the food industry, child hunger, the relationship of poverty and nutrition, and public and private responsibilities in ensuring adequate health. In other words, food banks cannot avoid the politics of the situation they find themselves in — a situation which they have partly created. To understand food banks properly, it is important to see their work as political activity and at the same time to recognize that they are serving a number of contradictory political functions.

Are food banks political?

It must, however, be recognized that many food bank staff volunteers, funders and donors of food do not, and do not wish to, see their activities as in any sense political. In that food banks are not allied with any of Canada's political parties and that they are registered as non-profit charitable organizations, they are right. Also, inasmuch as food bank personnel want to concentrate on their primary task of redistributing surplus food and avoid advocacy they clearly want to be apolitical. Charity and voluntary work, in their view, is not to be confused with politics.

And yet, the very fact of starting a food bank is at once a political statement and political act, if we understand politics as the use of power and the ownership, control and distribution of resources in society. For individuals, churches, unions, NGO's and corporate sponsors to work together through food banks to create new social arrangements for the feeding of hungry people neglected by the state is a profoundly political act.

There are three major reasons why this is so. First, the food banks' actions, whether they acknowledge this publicly or not, are making an explicit and direct criticism of government's failure to respond to the crisis. In that sense, they are pointing to a misuse of legislated authority, and of legitimate power, by government. Second, through receiving and freely giving surplus food, they are altering the way in which the existing system of state welfare, the public safety net, operates. At the same time, of course, they are also adding a new dimension to the profit-making food distribution system in Canada. Thus, their hidden or latent function is to support the status quo, in particular the mean concept of poverty which underlies inadequate social assistance benefits. In other words, food banks fulfill a number of contradictory functions: they support the current system and yet raise questions about its validity and its distribution of resources.

Food banks, then, are highly political activities, a fact which has been recognized by a number of them through their involvement in public education and advocacy. This has been demonstrated by the Edmonton and Greater Vancouver Food Banks, and through the legal and welfare rights activities of the labour/union food banks. However, it would be incorrect to identify only some food banks as political on account of their level of advocacy. All food banks are making political statements about the status quo, the welfare state, the public safety net, the food industry and the distribution of power in Canadian society. What is important to understand are the contradictory political functions which they serve.

B. Political Functions of Food Banks

Food banks are symbolic of the shift away from a social rights/citizenship model of social justice, which reflects social democratic influences in the building of the Canadian welfare state, towards increasingly residual forms. Such residualism espouses a "casualty treatment" approach to poverty and promotes voluntarism, both of which are exemplified by food banks. The view is held that private solutions to public problems are preferable in that they are less costly, promote self-reliance and encourage community participation. Food banks, then, act as practical examples and, perhaps most significantly, as ideological marker flags, of the way ahead for social welfare. However, even if such an emphasis upon volunteering and charitable enterprise would work to everyone's benefit, it is not such a simple matter.

The contradictions of food banking:

To understand the impact and possible consequences of the voluntarism epitomized by food banks, one must appreciate that the functions served by food banks reflect deep contradictions imbedded in the history of the welfare state itself. On the one hand, food banks, like the welfare state, can be seen as meeting the needs of capital and the state by acting as a means of social control. On the other hand, they can be viewed as forms of voluntarist social endeavor which could, in a number of ways, act as catalysts for progressive change.

There are no easy answers, as the existence of food banks presents us with a number of moral and practical dilemmas. Should we disband food banks on the basis that feeding the hungry in Canada is in law, if not in practice, a matter of public mandate? What would be the social consequences of such a decision by the churches, NGO's and U.A.C.'s? Given that food banks are themselves having a hard time making ends meet, should they receive more support when the magnitude of the problem of need is beyond their capabilities? Should food banks be assisted toward becoming permanent and institutionalized extensions of the Canadian income security system, if the social right to adequate income support is thereby further eroded? Is the pursuit of voluntarism of a higher moral order than ensuring through public fiat that no one must rely on the volatile moralizing and inadequate charity of others to ensure sufficient nutritious food on the table?

As a way of addressing these and other questions, we will first consider the contradictory political functions of food banks in today's welfare state. We will then consider their likely future and how they can be expected to respond to the conflicting demands being placed upon them.

The positive functions of voluntarism:

From the perspective that food banks are essentially on the side of the poor and that they are advancing the cause of oppressed and working class people, a number of points can be made.

First, it is evident that the food banks, organized by church workers, lay people or union and unemployed activists, have helped to keep serious malnutrition and hunger from affecting the lives of many thousands of Canadians. In that sense, they have provided a real and emergency lifeline in a time of personal crisis for many Canadian women, children and men. Social assistance and unemployment insurance benefits have been supplemented and people have been helped in a very practical way, with a minimum of bureaucratic red tape.

Second, in so doing, the food banks have demonstrated that the voluntary sector, albeit with some government support, is capable of responding quickly and effectively to acute and pressing crises. In this sense, the example of the food banks bears out one of the main conclusions of a study of voluntarism in Canada conducted in 1983 through the auspices of the Canadian Council on Social Development. The authors, Jean-Bernard Robichaud and Roch Gaudet, conclude that voluntary activity ". . . is a dynamic reality which utilizes the creative energy of thousands of men and women working in countless voluntary organizations throughout Canada. This creative energy produces numerous and varied initiatives in many provinces."[1]

In other words, the traditional role of the NGO's and churches in pioneering new forms of social welfare is still very much alive and valuable in times of crisis. The NGO is often able to step in where governments are unwilling to tread.

In a third important way, the food banks have tapped an enormous well of altruism that exists in Canadian society. They have shown that the dominant ideology of possessive individualism, which C.B. Macpherson identifies as the essential prerequisite of private market society,[2] is tempered by feelings of solidarity and concern for others. Of course, such concern may be tempered by the thought that "there, but for the grace of God, go I" or that one day the donors may find themselves in a similar situation.[3] Whether the act of giving is motivated by the comradely concern of the union activist for the unemployed worker, the spiritual compassion of the local priest or lay worker, or the motivations of corporate donors and the thousands of private givers, there is in all of this some recognition that people's need to survive is beyond them, and that society, through its formal and public welfare state apparatus, has failed them. Survival is a major theme of Canadian literature. Food banks are evidence of its strength as a sustaining commitment.

If this discovery is correct, then a fourth and even more significant point is being made. The very existence and practice of food banking serves to remind the public almost daily, largely through public debate in the media, that a number of critical social problems continue to plague the lives of millions of Canadians. As one Albertan social worker put it, "Church people are beginning to understand that tax dollars are not being well spent. The social allowance cutbacks had a significant impact on the demand for food (at the food bank). They were a turning point in people's political awareness."

Whether the newspapers, radio and television will eventually tire of such reporting is difficult to say, but food banks have served to focus some attention on many problems: surplus and waste food in the production and distribution system and the need for sound food conservation practices; continued large scale unemployment; inadequate social assistance benefits and the breakdown of the public safety net; the crisis of hunger in Canadian society; the need to reform an excessively bureaucratic and centralized system of state welfare; continued cutbacks in social spending; and, the need to raise public consciousness about such issues. McIntyre, in his defence of food banks, makes a number of similar points when he writes,

> Food banks are partly a response to inadequacies in social assistance, but they are much more than that. They address problems and issues which strike at the core of our values and beliefs. They stand for caring and sharing, utilization of surpluses, consciousness raising and education about people's fundamental rights and citizen participation in feeding the nation's poor. Their message is both for each of us and all of us.[4]

In many ways, then, in their activities and the public questions they raise (whether or not this is an explicit part of their agenda), the food banks are opposed to the idea of a centralized and bureaucratic welfare state. In that sense, they can be seen to embody and reflect the moral imperative of the reduction of the state which Resnick claims is central to the theology of the new right.[5]

However, despite the fact that the food banks, missions and soup kitchens have been rescuing thousands of Canadians who have fallen through the public safety net, contributing to social solidarity and providing a much needed critique of the welfare state and centralized bureaucratic power, food banks can also be seen as threatening both individual and social welfare. It is to these functions that we now turn.

Regressive functions, hiding the real issues:

One of the most serious arguments made against food banks is that they deflect public and political attention from the need for long-standing and urgent reforms in the social security system. The contradiction is that, while the food banks provide concrete evidence of the breakdown of the safety net, they also obscure the real issues. Food banks help us to believe the public safety net is working by leaving the impression that if changes are required, the voluntary sector will provide the remedy. In other words, voluntarism and the privatization of public welfare are effective and efficient answers to the problems. They give the impression that capitalism is basically working and that any changes required are just minor tinkering. They do this in a number of ways.

First, they emphasize the fact that the food they are providing is only intended as a short-term emergency supplement to the existing income support payments received by those using the food banks. In other words, the public is asked to accept the view that the crisis will soon disappear and the welfare system will return to normal. Food banks are simply a stop-gap measure. This, however, is not likely the case given the continuation of serious unemployment in Canada. In March, 1985, the numbers of people officially unemployed stood at 1.4 million, and showed no decline from a year earlier.[6]

It is also evident, from the report of the Edmonton Food Bank, that emergency food is becoming a substitute for public cash benefits. This view is borne out by the increase in demand for food following the imposition of cutbacks, the heavy demand for food towards the end of each month when social assistance cheques run out, and by the fact that government assistance workers in all provinces are referring their clients to food banks.

This last act alone demonstrates official awareness and even endorsement of the inadequacy of benefits. It is evidence of the acceptance of private charity, not public obligation, as the true service of last resort. In other words, governments find the food banks a convenient excuse not to address deepseated and long term problems in the public safety net. The pressure to act is off them. They can rely on charity rather than support people with adequate incomes. In this way governments hasten a return to the moralizing and preaching implicit in most charitable works.

While it is true that some food banks (Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina) have commented publicly on the inadequacy of benefits and the need for provincial governments to accept their responsibilities, governments are let off the hook because the food banks foster the public belief that they are capable of handling the crisis. Indeed, they have to. Constant appeals through the local media (including the CBC), church drives, the patronage of Canadian Football League teams, and schools and service clubs encourage us to believe that there is sufficient food if only we keep on giving. Again, in this way, the real debate about the breakdown of the public safety net is masked. Hunger is not even seen as a controversial political issue.

The fact is, however, that these countless acts of altruism are not in themselves sufficient. Some food banks in Canada have been turning people away empty-handed; others simply give out less food per person per month and can make no guarantees about the nutritional value of the food they are providing. The evidence from the United States is not encouraging. Press reports indicate that certain food banks in Los Angeles County are unable to meet the needs of hungry Americans.[7] And this is a country which already has a major food stamp programme. This finding is confirmed by a 1984 U.S. study of American food banks and appropriately entitled *Bitter Harvest*. Based on the responses of nearly three hundred emergency food providers nation-wide the report found that ". . . almost three-quarters (71 percent) of emergency food providers responded that private charity cannot meet the current demand for food assistance in their local communities."[8]

Still, these may be facts the public does not wish to hear. To a large extent, the belief that food banks are an appropriate response to a social problem of national proportions is sustained by the individuals, groups and organizations who remain willing and able to contribute time, food and money. And, of course, if food banks were to indicate that they were not able to cope, the supply of food might suddenly dry up. They are, therefore, caught in a real dilemma.

Ironically, of course, this dilemma is created by government policy or the lack of it. As Hunsley and Hill comment, "Growth in this sector has been affected by government action. In the past few years, provincial governments have been pulling back on social services, suggesting that families, churches and communities shoulder a heavier share of the load. At times, the 'off-loading' of responsibility has come to include income and subsistence."[9] The problem is that, despite the food banks' need to convince the public they can handle the problem of hunger in Canadian society, the evidence suggests that they are having a hard time.

Mystifying surplus food:

A second important argument against food banks is that they function to mystify the whole question of surplus in the food production and retailing industry in Canada and deflect attention from an examination of waste in the private food market. The contradiction is that the existence of food banks is a daily reminder of the fact and extent of hunger, yet at the same time survival depends on food policies and practices which helped to create the problem in the first place. Inasmuch as food banks have been extensions of public relief so they also act as agents of the food industry. This is not a topic which has been directly engaged here as the focus has been on the relationship of the food banks to the public safety net. However, a number of points should be made.

Food banks clearly depend on the voluntary good will of the food industry and supermarket chains as well as smaller stores to work effectively. Yet this very dependence generates contradictions. If, as the new right philosophy would have us believe, private markets and the price mechanism are more efficient and morally superior as ways of distributing resources in society, how is it that 20 per cent of all food produced under such a system goes to waste in Canada? This figure may not be accurate, but it is the one claimed by Canadian food banks based on United States estimates.

Is the answer, as the food banks' action suggests, simply to take that surplus food and distribute it freely to the poor, or is it to raise questions about the efficiency of the private food industry? The charitable giving of the food banks leaves untouched such questions about the private ownership of food and the politics of the food industry. Giving away this food also creates new forms of dependency (on the food banks), an anathema to those on the right when it takes the form of public dependency on social assistance.

In thinking about such issues, we have to remind ourselves that the food banks do need this surplus food (surplus only to the needs of profit): otherwise, they would go out of business and hunger would become increasingly widespread. It would, therefore, be very courageous or extremely foolish of a food bank to raise such questions with the corporate owners of food.

It should also be noted that food stores do have some financial interest in seeing the food banks operating, in two ways. First, it is less costly to give the surplus food away to the food bank than to have it dumped. Second, if Canadian food banks follow the example of their United States counterparts and permit the food industry to obtain tax write-offs for food they donate, then the business ethic will become firmly established. The topic of tax write-offs for surplus food was on the agenda of the first Canadian Food Bank Conference held in Edmonton, Alberta, May 3-4, 1985. In fact, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank is reportedly giving tax-deduction receipts for donations of $500 or more if the amount can be verified.[10]

However, at the moment in Canada, charitable food banks are dependent on the private enterprise food system. They are unlikely to be overly critical of the way the industry operates precisely because they need the waste it generates. They thereby function to sustain a system which is unable to ensure that people have enough food to eat.

While, on the one hand, food banks are a constant reminder that hunger is a national crisis in Canada, at the same time, the way they operate obscures critical questions about food policy and the operation of the food industry. These questions include the cost-price squeeze facing farmers; the role of agri-business; food for profit; and breaking the chemical fix, among others. *The Land of Milk and Money*, the report of the People's Food Commission, should be compulsory reading for all food bank participants.

Agencies of social control:

Food banks, through deflecting attention from the policies and practices of the welfare state and the private food industry, can be seen to be meeting the needs of capital and acting as mechanisms of social control. These functions are more evident when we consider the roles played by the food banks in substituting permanently for welfare and in disciplining labour.

If the development of food banks in the United States' major food distribution centres for that emergency food network is any guide, food banks in Canada will become an institutionalized and permanent extension of the welfare system. This might not happen easily, but the fact that Canadian food banks gathered for their first national convention in Edmonton in May, 1985, suggests the organizations' strong desire to build a national network. At this meeting 80 delegates and observers from over 30 food banks across the country voted in principle to create a national association of food banks. While this may have many benefits in information exchanges and increased efficiency, it also means that the food banks will become increasingly recognized as legitimate extensions of the public safety net.

Undermining social rights:

As this happens, the food banks, and the voluntarism they symbolize, will gradually undermine the concept of a publicly supported and financed safety net by treating assistance as a privilege, and not a right. This will occur as food banks tighten their rationing criteria, introduce more stringent eligibility assessments and make increasing distinctions between the deserving and non-deserving. Again, there is already evidence that this is happening in certain food banks as they contend with limited food supplies and public criticism that people are simply freeloading on the food bank system.[11] What will gradually be undermined is the notion of a social, legally enforceable right to assistance by people in need. Moreover, food banks will help us to forget what Struthers reminds us of: ". . . that the origins of public responsibility for income security in the thirties in Canada derived in part from a complete failure of the voluntary sector to cope with the massive problems of unemployment, hunger and distress."[12]

Why, then, are we being asked to step backwards to concepts and practices which did not work then and are incapable of handling the crisis of the 1980's and probably the 1990's? Indeed, the task of feeding people today is already diverting the churches and NGO's from their other tasks and activities. This is of real concern to many in these organizations who feel that politicians are disregarding their constitutional and legal mandates and public responsibilities. Joan McMurtry, United Church Minister in Regina, commenting on the work of volunteers, has said they are becoming resentful of the time spent on food parcel work when the CAP safety net should be meeting basic entitlements.

Disciplining labour:

It is, however, in the interests of the state to keep the volunteers working in this way and to support food banks as extensions of the public safety net. Food banks save the government money and help to perform one of the key functions of social assistance as a mechanism for disciplining labour. They thereby fulfill one of the important contradictions of the welfare state: while bestowing benefits upon the poor, they also act as a means of social control. How can it be said that the charitable and community-minded work of the food banks operates in theory and in practice against oppressed people while helping them?

The answer lies in the way the continuum of policies and services including food banks and the public safety net disciplines labour. As Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have pointed out, relief arrangements in market societies ". . . are ancilliary to economic arrangements. Their chief function is to regulate labour . . . . To demean and punish those who do not work is to exalt by contrast even the meanest labour at the meanest wage."[13] Relief reinforces the work and productivity ethic by applying the stigma of less eligibility. The contradiction is almost perfect. While the food banks remind us visibly of the breakdown of the public safety net, and can rightly be seen as catalysts for change, their actions keep alive the essential principle of "less eligibility": that no one receiving welfare should get more than the lowest paid wage earner. According to Struthers, this principle, officially endorsed by the British government in its 1834 Poor Law Report, essentially saw the primary aim of unemployment policy as ". . . not to relieve the need of the indigent but to preserve the motivation of those who worked, particularly those in the worst jobs a society had to offer."[14] While some indigent people were seen as deserving (the sick, the widowed, the elderly), the able-bodied unemployed worker was not. In this way, the stigma of poverty was branded upon the jobless.

Less eligibility was adopted in Canada until World War I as the key assumption underlying Canadian approaches to poverty and unemployment. People were urged to save for a rainy day, despite the fact "that thousands were put out of work each winter by seasonal factors."[15] In the thirties, the battle for federal responsibility for unemployment policies and social insurance was in part a struggle against "less eligibility."

In the sixties, the Canada Assistance Plan's recognition that assistance should be granted to "persons in need" regardless of cause could be seen as a significant break from the stigmatizing distinctions of the deserving and non-deserving poor.

Ross, in fact, shows that in 1980 a family of four with a single earner on minimum wage would be worse off than the same family receiving social assistance.[16] While he recognizes that both minimum wage and social assistance benefits are below the poverty line, and his example is subject to a number of qualifications, the conclusion could be drawn that less eligibility is dead.

However, this is not the case. First, the very fact that minimum wage and welfare payments are thousands of dollars below the poverty line constantly reminds employed people in a depression that they should dampen their wage demands. Second, in recent years, provincial governments have either reinforced or reintroduced a categorical approach to the granting of social assistance based on the employable status of unemployed people. Other categories, such as the aged, disabled and single parent families are also used despite the view expressed in a recent federal-provincial study of income security that "the only eligibility requirement for social assistance benefits is need, regardless of cause."[17]

Unemployed employable persons are in general expected to get by with less. The same study states that:

> Each provincial social assistance program includes a number of incentive measures designed to promote the entry or re-entry into the active labour force of able-bodied unemployed applicants; these measures may include *lower* asset and income exemption levels than the general caseload, *reduced* benefit levels and a wide range of employment support services and programs, some of which may be *compulsory* for applicants in this category.[18] (Author's emphasis.)

In other words, the stigma of the deserving and non-deserving has been re-emphasized, and less eligibility as a general concept has not disappeared. The purpose is obvious: to make sure that wage demands are held down in a period of high unemployment, and to encourage the jobless to take work at any price. The euphemism is "work incentive programmes" such as the one introduced in Saskatchewan in 1984 under the guise of welfare reform. Benefits to unemployed employable people on social assistance were first cut; some of the money saved was put into short-term job creation and training schemes for which clients were eligible after a three-month waiting period; and the employable clients were then told that if they did not accept what was offered, they would be cut off welfare. Similar schemes with local variations operate in a number of other provinces.[19] In this way, the victims of structural unemployment are individually blamed and made to suffer for situations beyond their control.

Food banks as part of the welfare system:

The food banks, unwittingly it would seem, play their part in promoting these policies by acting as the voluntary back-up to a public safety net that has fallen apart. If and when they become accepted as a permanent feature of the Canadian welfare system, perhaps receiving federal grants through the Canada Assistance Plan for which they are undoubtedly eligible, then their long-term function of social control will become clearer. People already feel stigmatized and inadequate by having to turn to social assistance. If they then cannot manage on the parsimonious benefits they receive, one can only imagine their feelings of sheer helplessness at having to turn to the food banks. And these banks can no longer guarantee adequate support.

The contradictory social control and catalytic functions of food banks are fulfilled by appealing at the same time to a number of conflicting demands. They act as constant reminders of the breakdown of the public safety net and the inefficiency of the private food market, while at the same time helping to preserve both of these systems. Though they could act as catalysts for change, their primary task of distributing wasted food serves largely to deflect attention from the underlying issues.

Food banks also give vent to important feelings of altruism and concern in the community about the survival of fellow citizens. However, the way this voluntarism is largely expressed has the effect of confirming the goals and practices of a public welfare system that is increasingly stigmatizing, inadequate and inefficient. Indeed, not even the food banks with their large pool of private support can effectively pick up all of the pieces.

At the same time that food banks, through their food conservation philosophies and practices, are making an important ecological statement about the need for society to better husband its renewable resources, they are also raising questions about the bureaucratic welfare state and acting as an antidote to state paternalism. In other words, they are showing there is another way to ensure that people in need have food on the table.

Of course, the food banks cannot escape the welfare system which they inevitably serve and the functions of disciplining labour which they perform. Their clients are those of the welfare system; their rationing and eligibility criteria increasingly resemble those of welfare bureaucracies; and the services they provide are fast becoming an important part of the safety net itself. It is difficult, therefore, not to conclude that the true function of the food bank is to prop up an inadequate welfare system. And yet, it is important to remember that within the food bank movement itself, many people draw different conclusions.

Notes

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C. Are Food Banks Here to Stay?

Questions frequently asked are: how long will the food banks be around? Will they become permanent fixtures in the welfare state services in Canada, or will they die away as quickly as they have emerged? These are difficult questions to answer, as the future of the food banks depends on several factors. There are, however, a number of indicators suggesting that food banks are likely to be around for some time yet and that they will leave an indelible mark on the operation of Canada's public safety net. Indeed nearly half of Canada's food banks think they will be around for two to five years and one fifth think they will become permanent.[1]

As we explore these questions, we should also be considering two others. Will the food banks, in their present voluntary form, be able to meet the food requirements of those unprotected by social assistance programmes in Canada? What other roles, in addition to providing direct feeding programmes, might we expect the food banks to play, if they are not simply intent on propping up an ailing welfare system?

The answer to the question of the food banks' long-term existence will ultimately depend on how satisfied they are with their own effectiveness and how they understand and act upon the dilemmas inherent in their roles. As this book has shown, food banks, as voluntary agencies, play their part in the network of welfare state provision. They have to contend with the contradictions of their work, which finds them ensuring that surplus food from a profit-oriented food industry is reaching hungry people while contributing to the maintenance of a welfare system which increasingly denies people their rights. In other words, will food banks prefer to act as catalysts for change? Or will they opt for a residual back-up role which safeguards the social control functions of the public safety net?

This debate within the food bank movement is unlikely to be resolved in any clearcut way. The food banks themselves reflect different principles, seen in their voluntary/charitable or labour/union auspices and their different distribution systems. The debate is also one between the harvesters of waste and the providers of food to the hungry. This duality is also not easily resolved.

However, the question of the future of food banks must be faced sooner or later by their sponsors and staff, if only because they were set up in the first place as emergency relief organizations to handle short term crises. As one United Church minister expressed it in Vancouver, "What is to be done? We face a moral dilemma. Food banks are not the solution, but can we end them right away?" What, then, are some of the factors likely to influence the future existence and development of food banks in Canada?

Indicators of long term development:

One indication that food banks will be around for a long time is the fact that soup kitchens, missions and a range of church emergency food programmes have always played a minor and residual role in feeding Canada's poor. Food banks are, in many ways, creatures of these organizations. Through their coordinating functions they represent a step forward in ensuring better services. In that sense, then, food banks cannot be expected to disappear. They may decline in number and in visibility, but there will continue to be a demand for them.

While the welfare systems in the United States and Canada differ in many respects, the fact that food banks south of the border have developed into an institution of the United States welfare network since 1967 suggests that a similar institution may well emerge in Canada. The contact between the Canadian and United States food bank movements is one sign of this development, the May, 1985 national food bank convention in Edmonton is another. At this meeting, representatives of the St. Mary's Food Bank organization in Phoenix, commited to a World Food Bank, were present. So were staff from the U.S. Second Harvest food bank organization. A third sign is the development of regional food bank associations in the Maritimes, Quebec-Ontario and Western Canada. A national organization is also being developed in central Canada.

Bill Kerwin, a social work professor at the University of Calgary, believes that Canadian food banks represent U.S. colonization of the Canadian welfare system. This view merits some attention. In the U.S., the food bank debate is between charitable and self-help models. Whether to support food banks would not be seen as an ideological issue. In Canada, though, we have a third way: collective help and public action. It is this aspect of our social welfare which is being attacked by the self-help, private enterprise values south of the border. Perhaps the growth of food banks in B.C. and Alberta can partly be explained in these terms given their greater receptivity to U.S. ideas.[2]

Another important indicator is the length and depth of the economic recession, or as it might be more appropriately termed by those experiencing its worst effects, the depression of the 1980's. Clearly, the fact that there are approximately two million people out of work in Canada in the mid- eighties, and that this figure shows little sign of decreasing, suggests that long-term unemployment is now inescapable. If the jobless rates, the unemployment insurance rolls and social assistance caseloads do not show any marked reductions, and there is little evidence they will, then food banks will probably be digging in for the long term.

It was the scope and scale of joblessness, coupled with inappropriate government policies, which put the demands on the public safety net in the first place. And these demands went unmet as governments chose to look the other way. Poverty is again on the increase.

These points suggest a third group of factors which are likely to have a decisive impact on the continuation of the food banks. How will the federal government and provincial administrations respond to long term unemployment? Response is not simply a matter of economic choices but also of social policy decisions. The signs are not propitious at any level of government, except perhaps in Manitoba.

The federal government has identified cutting the deficit as the top priority on its economic agenda. It hopes to encourage private sector investment and thereby fuel economic growth, which in turn will lead to job creation and increasingly selective social spending targeted at the poor.[3] Yet, what evidence is there that such a neo-conservative recipe will create long term employment at decent wages and the full participation of Canadians in their own society?

There is, in fact scant evidence that reliance on the increased profitability of the private sector will translate into long-term, well paying job creation on the scale required to solve Canada's unemployment problem.[4] We are instead likely to continue a steady diet of short term job creation schemes paying minimum wage. Poverty, and more crucially inequality, will not succumb to such measures.

At the same time, the way the federal government is shaping the debate on Canada's social safety net suggests that only a narrow and highly-selective re-interpretation will be permitted. The focus will be on a narrow range of child and elderly[5] benefits, and on short term and low paid work incentive programmes. The question of the adequacy of social security will not be addressed as, of course, it raises fundamental questions about inequality and redistribution which are far from the thinking of the neo-conservative mind. We can expect perhaps some tinkering with unemployment insurance and social assistance programmes, but they will continue to shoulder the heaviest burdens and, as in the first half of the eighties, will not be able to cope. If this view is correct, food banks and other forms of charities supplying clothing, toys and household items are likely to have a brisk trade over the long term.

Another way of anticipating the future of Canadian food banks is by considering the attitude and behaviour of those interest groups most directly affected by them. These groups, in turn, influence the public's perception of food banks. The ideas and actions of government, pressure groups (including political parties), churches, labour organizations, users and the food industry, as well as the media, are important to recognize.

What follows simply reflects the debate occurring within and among these groups. The analysis is in no sense representative, but an attempt has been made to distil some of the key influences at work.

Provincial government attitudes:

On the food bank issue, governments are publicly supportive of their activities and yet on the defensive. Indeed, one government official went so far as to say that food banks were a constant embarrassment to his department. While it is difficult to present an accurate picture of the views and policies of all levels of government, the reported opinions of the British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan ministers responsible for social assistance mirror to some degree those of their federal and provincial counterparts. Essentially, they argue that provincial welfare systems provide an adequate safety net and that, if there is unmet need, the food banks are doing a fine job and should be left to get on with it.

Grace McCarthy, British Columbia's Minister of Human Resources, is on record as being "thankful for the food banks because they showed British Columbians were prepared to help those less fortunate, but the needy were getting very good assistance from the taxpayers."[6] Since she had turned down a request for funding from the Greater Vancouver Food Bank in June, 1983,[7] she clearly believed (or wanted the community to believe) that social assistance benefits were adequate.

If one thing can be said about British Columbia's policy, it is that it is consistent. In early 1985, Opposition MLA Bob Williams asked in the legislature if the Minister had met the people who handled the food banks "to see whether she might play a more significant role with the needy of this province?" McCarthy replied that her ministry did not plan to get involved with the food banks, which are part of the voluntary sector. "We applaud the efforts of these people, but we do not wish to take over their job," she was quoted as saying.[8]

Neil Webber, Alberta's Minister of Social Services and Community Health and his Saskatchewan counterpart, Gordon Dirks, followed a similar line. Both participated in the opening of food banks and presumably value the food bank contributions to their own welfare programmes. As Gordon Dirks was quoted as saying: "Even in this era of centralized government and increased welfare rates, it would be a tragedy if the private charitable impulse could be smothered. Food banks are a part of that manifestation . . . ."[9]

But, clearly, governments are embarrassed by the existence of food banks and by the criticism that food banks are needed because of inadequate social assistance benefits. That governments are on the defensive was shown most clearly when the Alberta Minister attempted to dismiss the criticisms made by the Edmonton Food Bank in February, 1985, that 60 per cent of the food bank's clients were on social assistance. The Minister denied this, saying that the figure was only 40 per cent (as if this somehow exonerated his department).[10] He even implied, according to an Edmonton Journal columnist, that Edmontonians did not know how to budget properly.[11] Furthermore, the Alberta government withdrew from the food bank group which produced the study and announced increases in social assistance benefits the day before the report was scheduled for release.[12]

In Saskatchewan, the Minister was quoted as saying that there was no connection between the proliferation of food banks and the cuts in welfare for single employable people in May 1984, because the first food bank opened before the cuts.[13] What he failed to comment on was the steadily increasing demand at the Regina Food Bank in the fall of 1984 and the winter of 1985. Dirks also believes that food banks are in high demand because they offer free food and would still be in demand if welfare payments were doubled.[14] His attitude is that it is a human impulse to take advantage of free food. Perhaps his proposition should be tested empirically; he should double the welfare rates and see what happens. There is a point at which people have sufficient money to exercise choice, surely an essential right in a free society.

However, regardless of the particular government arguments for or against food banks, one key approach is to deflect attention from the inadequacy of the welfare system. The Saskatchewan Minister defends his rates as being the highest in Canada (even though in 1983 they were 25 per cent below the official and most conservative poverty line). In British Columbia, Grace McCarthy even claims, as she did on a recent CBC "Fifth

Estate" programme, that nobody in her province has to go hungry. She went on to say:

> . . . And the *Canada Assistance Act* ensures that no one in this nation need go hungry. And for anyone to say as we look across this world and see what real hunger is, what real deprivation is, what real need is, you can't tell me that there are people starving to death in this nation. And for the media to perpetrate that, and for the attitudes to be perpetrated across this nation, not just in British Columbia, by people who would politically use the poor, who would politically use the handicapped for their political goals, then I say that that's too bad because there's a bigger job to be done. There's an attitudinal change to be done.[15]

The whole interview with the Minister was not aired on the show, but what McCarthy was attempting to do, and probably with some success, was to suggest that the problem, if there was one, had been taken care of. In any event, it was nothing compared to starvation in Africa and had been made into an issue by the media. In this way, she skilfully deflected attention from the critical shortcomings of the British Columbia welfare system and found a scapegoat. It is true that attitudes need changing. The question remains: whose attitudes?

In the Maritimes, the New Brunswick Minister of Social Services, Nancy Clark-Teed, has actually "encouraged the establishment of soup kitchens, used clothing depots and secondhand furniture stores as a means of abdicating her department's responsibilities."[16] In other provinces privatization is advocated as deliberate government policy.

It should come as no surprise that such views essentially supporting charitable and private market solutions to unemployment, reflect those of Canada's neo-conservative think tank, the Fraser Institute in Vancouver. Indeed, Walter Block, one of the Institute's chief spokespersons, has been quoted as saying ". . . that churches have been stripped, by governments, of their once-held role of providing welfare and charitable support to those in need. There is, thus, a need for society to return to a private and voluntary form of social welfare."[17] The Fraser Institute was closely associated with Bennett's free enterprise economic policies and social spending cuts introduced in 1983 in British Columbia. It has also acted as an advisor to governments across Canada and is heavily backed by corporate finance.

Church attitudes:

What do the churches think of such responsibilities being laid upon them, and how comfortable are they with the task of administering and supporting the food banks? These questions are important but difficult to answer, if for no other reason than the very diversity of the churches in Canada, which makes uniform opinion hard to come by. There are, however, signs that the church, in a broad and collective sense, both supports the food banks in their emergency and crisis role and at the same time has grave philosophical and practical doubts about a continuing role.

Critical dilemmas:

One group of downtown church workers discussing the issue of food banks at a 1984 workshop sponsored by the Urban Core Support Network in Vancouver posed three critical questions. Do food banks enable governments to ignore their responsibilities in aiding the poor? Do they represent self-perpetuating charity rather than justice? And are they creating a long term problem in their desire to deal with a short term problem?[18]

Some members of the group felt that ". . . food banks must look attractive to governments concerned with deficits and limited budgets: they look like a cheap and efficient alternative to welfare — if you can't give money, give food."[19] Others thought that food banks seemed to lack a vision of working themselves out of a job. They lacked long term goals.[20]

This particular church group, which is in no way representative of church opinion as a whole, did seem to agree that food banks were helping ". . . to educate a formerly naive constituency (the volunteers) about the realities of poverty and that they could become a major focus for developing a new critical awareness by the larger community."[21] Participants also felt it was important to study alternatives to food banks, as this would help to make important distinctions between "resource" and "conservation" issues and between charity and justice. When should the government be responsible and when the community?[22]

While no answers were reached at this particular workshop, some very important questions were raised. In some ways, these reflected the practical considerations of ministers and lay people who felt that food banking was absorbing too much of their time and energy, particularly when these responsibilities had been assumed by the state. Others believed that material hunger was a matter of public responsibility, athough they also believed the church could not stand by as people went hungry. Father Jim Tiffen of St. Matthew's Maryland Christian Ministry in Winnipeg put it most succinctly when he said: "I do believe that food, as health care, is a right, not a privilege . . . . I think the responsibility for this whole area is government's."[23] The Reverend Allan Bush, who started the St. Alban's Richmond Food Bank in British Columbia, was even more direct and critical when he said that the government is taking advantage of the "kindly and loving" who are ministering to the needy. He went on to say: "I think it's extremely evil that a government would try to exploit that kind of behaviour on behalf of other human beings. And that's what's happening."[24]

It is a similar story in Ontario where Father Dennis Drainville, an Anglican priest, runs STOP 103, a ministry to serve the poor. Food is part of that service, and while Drainville acknowledges that this is simply a part of the church's business, ". . . the real problem is centred on the fact that the government throws the church a few thousand bucks and then sends an army of referrals — but doesn't admit that they do. They refuse to acknowledge that they are more and more using the churches as a means of extending social services."[25]

All, however, do not agree. Roger Lanteigne of the Union Gospel Mission in Vancouver sees his church's main purpose as being "to feed the hungry and spread the gospel — that's what Jesus Christ was all about. It does not depend on what the government does and does not do."[26] In other words, "the poor ye shall have with you always." This view certainly points to widely divergent opinion and debate on the question of the role of the church in relation to poverty, food banks and public responsibility.

However, if the ethical statements of the Catholic Bishops are any guide, and if the historic social reformism of the United Church remains a powerful force, then the debate about the roles and responsibilities of government and the church in Canadian society will continue. Some argue that the churches must consider political action and lobbying and must be aware of the tremendous impact they can have. Indeed, if the views of Dr. Charles Paris, Chairman of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews are heeded, then the ". . . poor and unemployed will only be helped by educating the public and attacking the severe structural problems in our society."[27] It was a message echoed by Father Jim Roberts, Roman Catholic priest and Solidarity Coalition chairman, who said that the churches had learned about the structural causes of poverty and social disease from the Third World, especially Latin America. He felt it was now important to turn the spotlight on their own countries.

NGO attitudes:

The attitudes of anti-poverty organizations towards food banks are similar in many respects to those of the reform-minded churches. Patrick Johnston, Executive Director of the National Anti-Poverty Organisation, acknowledges that food banks are performing a critically-needed service. Yet NAPO and its provincial organizations are concerned lest the food banks become long term fixtures and thereby allow governments to retreat from their mandates and responsibilities.[28] Concern has also been expressed that welfare benefits will be cut back as food banks become permanently established.[29] Essentially, food banks are seen as a return to nineteenth century methods of charity, and their acceptance by the community could gradually undermine other social security programmes in Canada.[30]

Of course, the point should be made that charitable activities never did actually disappear, as the work of the Salvation Army and other church missions attest. Now, of course, poverty is once again on the increase and has become visible. The hope expressed by Gus Long, past president of the Federated Anti-Poverty Groups of British Columbia, is that the visibility of people in the food line-ups ". . . will spur the government to the realization that something has to be done. We have to do something real, concrete and effective and not simply try to put another bandage on the shell hole."[31]

It is also true that NGOs, like churches, represent voluntary activity, including food banks. It is therefore to be expected that many NGOs would support the work of local food banks. However, as Hunsley and Hill argue,

> . . . a clear line of differentiation between the roles of voluntary organizations and government must be defined. A CCSD analysis, by Jean Bernard Robichaud, indicated that provincial governments are deliberately relying on the voluntary sector to relieve pressure on health and social service budgets. Voluntary organizations must not be expected to pick-up society's responsibility for the provision of food, shelter, medical care, protection and financial support to the disadvantaged.[32]

Consumer attitudes:

NAPO is one organization representing the views of people who use the food banks and, in this sense, it provides a window on consumer opinion. To date, there has been no systematic attempt to gauge what food bank users think about the future of food banks. It would seem clear from the increasing demand that they are only too thankful that the food banks are there. It is a matter of urgent necessity. Typical of this view are the comments of a Saskatoon woman, married with two small children, receiving social assistance. After the rent, utilities and food bills are paid each month, $20 remains for emergencies. "We realized we couldn't make it without the food bank. I didn't care for myself, but it was for the kids I went. We just couldn't afford the food we needed for them."[33]

People know why they are using the food banks, and they know what would happen if the food banks closed their doors. Marie Crittendon, a Vancouver widow, lives for six months each year on unemployment insurance and what she gets from the food bank. Asked by Hana Gartner, on CBC's "Fifth Estate," what would happen if the food banks closed shop, Crittendon said:

> I think we would see such a rise in crime and suicides. And, I don't know about marches on government — I'm not much into that political sort of scene — but I think you would see so many desperate people taking really desperate moves, like crime, for instance. I wouldn't consider it myself at this point, but I think a lot of people would. If you have a family and you have to feed them, and it becomes a choice of stealing something or letting your child starve, you're going to steal. I would if my children were at home.[34]

The moral imperative for those operating the food banks is therefore very clear.

Media attitudes:

The media also play an important part in shaping the debate about the future of the food banks. Again, judging by the stories that have appeared from coast to coast in the national and provincial press and on local and national television and radio programmes, the reasons why food banks are needed and the responsibilities of governments are identified as key issues. Much less attention has been given to the topic of surplus and wasted food. However, just as the media can help to promote and legitimate the debate and its critical issues, they are at the same time projecting the view that hunger in Canada is not a controversial or even political issue. In fact, food banks are regarded as charities just like any others. Why does this occur?

Both the CBC and independent television and radio networks have sponsored radio shows raising money for food banks. Staff have organized food bank appeals in local shopping malls and have even visited schools asking for donations. Mark Cardiff, a CBC radio producer in Halifax, explained his corporation's support for a benefit concert for a Cape Breton food bank: "We want to draw attention to the situation these people are in. We want to raise some money for the food bank as well as show that the CBC does care about its broadcast community. And, not least, it's to provide ninety minutes of first class entertainment."[35]

The point at issue is not whether CBC staffers as individuals should or should not support the food bank; the question is rather how that institution frames and helps to legitimate the way the issue is perceived by the public. Would, for example, the CBC and independent networks organize fund raising drives for pro-choice or anti-abortion groups: would they help to organize support for peace and disarmament; would they contribute their time and organizing ability to support capital punishment? Even more to the point, if they recognize that hunger is a crisis in Canadian society, why would they not back a campaign for adequate welfare benefits? The answer is that these would be regarded as politically controversial topics and matters which the CBC, and other networks, would do well to stay away from. In the battle of the ratings and TV advertising it is good business to show you are community-minded. And being community-minded means you stick to the middle ground.

The point is not that the CBC has neglected its role in reporting the issues, nor that it has repressed debate in its programming. The more sensitive question is that through its charitable actions it has portrayed the work of the food banks as just another worthy cause, thereby helping to confirm in the public mind that voluntarism and food banks are the appropriate way to tackle the problem of hunger in Canada. In this way, the CBC has mystified the issue for the public. It has failed in its public mandate to have the facts squarely debated.

Food banks, it would appear, will be around for a long time judging from the length and depth of the recession, food banks' historical development in the United States and their contribution to existing missions and soup kitchens. Given the fact also that they perform valuable substitute work for governments, there will be no pressure from the state to abandon them. Governments are unlikely to attack the charitable impulses of their citizens, particularly when the impulses relieve the pressure on governments themselves.

At the same time, it is clear that even the opponents of food banks in the churches, the political parties and NGO's, will continue to support food banks by their actions if not by their words. Essentially, they support the idea that hungry people have to be fed but realize that, for both practical and philosophical reasons, food banks need to address public education, debate and advocacy. Practically, the issue for the food banks is whether they can meet the high demands being placed on them for emergency food. If they simply become food depots and distribution centres supplying bulk food to hostels and institutions, they will probably be able to cope. This is a policy which a number of food banks would like to pursue.

Supplying emergency food is, however, a different story. As the evidence shows, people are being turned away empty-handed; amounts of food are being reduced; nutritional standards cannot be safeguarded; food bank volunteering is distracting some churches and NGO's from other priorities and tasks; in the United States members of the emergency food network say private charity is unable to handle the crisis of hunger. Some have also commented that the food banks are somewhat faddish, and when the media spotlight wanes, so too will the support they receive. The critical question, then, for the food banks is whether they can do it. They may be around a long time, but what kind of service will they be providing? Are there limits to voluntarism?

Alternative roles for food banks:

Whether or not food banks survive, and if so, in what form, will ultimately depend on what role they see for themselves. The fact that the voluntary/charitable and labour/union approaches to food bank organizing rest on somewhat different assumptions suggests a number of alternatives. The debate is likely to be between those who see a long term future conserving wasted food and others who would like the future to be short. These latter organizers see their work as responding to emergency food needs generated by the current economic crisis. If they prefer to retain a direct service role acting as brokers for surplus food between the food industry and a range of social agencies, then they will probably be around a long time. This would seem to be a fairly straightforward task which lends itself to relatively simple administration. Much of the national food bank conference in Edmonton involved sharing information about how to run a food bank.

If, however, food banks wish to continue their work in the emergency food distribution field, then their future is likely to be somewhat different. Some food banks will probably close down, particularly if the demand subsides. If the demand remains high, others may call it a day in any case. At least one food bank in Hamilton has already closed its doors because it could not generate sufficient support. Food banks will have difficulty attracting and keeping the interests of volunteers and agencies who are themselves finding it difficult to manage, and who believe that government is really responsible in the first place. Will the food banks allow themselves to be used by governments as an antidote for the failures of the authorities?

For food banks and churches, NGO's and unions which have the resources but who do not wish to be used in this way, there are three choices: close down, bite one's tongue and carry on, or become directly involved in public education, debate and advocacy. All three options will probably be exercised. However, it is important for those food banks which continue to recognize that in the minds of the public they have earned a legitimacy which does enable them to take on the role of public educator and advocate. In fact, it is probably the only defensible role they can play.

As social agencies involved practically with the whole question of wasted food and feeding hungry people, they know the issues from experience. One sure way they can respond constructively to the contradictions of their role is to reveal the limitations of the public safety net. And while educating people about the situation, they should be advocating directly and indirectly for alternative policies. In this way, they can make some sense of the conflict between their social control and social change functions.

There are a number of examples of this kind of work undertaken by food banks and related agencies in Canada. They include the advocacy work of the Unemployment Action Centres in British Columbia, the political education work of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank, the advocacy work of the Edmonton Food Bank agencies, the public questions of the Regina Food Bank, the acknowledgement by many food bank directories that the inadequacy of the welfare system needs changing, and the work of the Food Action Coalition of Toronto. There are doubtless many other examples.

The essential point is that food banks pose both a threat and an opportunity. The threat they represent is a return to the voluntarism and ad hoc residual relief of the thirties; the opportunity is a re-examination of the public safety net and promotion of social rights and entitlements.

Notes

1. See *Canadian Foodbank Update Survey*, 1986.
2. Harrington, *New American Poverty*, p. 4. I am indebted to Dr. Ernie Lightman for this observation.
3. Canada. Department of Finance, "A New Direction for Canada: An Agenda for Economic Renewal," 8.11.84.
4. See Ternowetsky, G., "Controlling the Deficit and a Private Sector Led Recovery: Noble Themes or Symbols of Legitimation?," University of Calgary, 1985, p. 10.
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8. "Food banks on own," *The Sun*, 13.2.85.
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16. Mullaly, R., "Social Welfare in New Brunswick Vigilante Style," *Perception*, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 25.
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18. Notes, Urban Core Support Network Workshop, Vancouver, October, 1984, p. 1.
19. Ibid., p. 2.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 3.
22. Ibid.
23. Canadian Press, "Private charities don't want to be used as an excuse," Regina *Leader-Post*, January 2, 1985.
24. *Times Colonist*, July 13, 1984.
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30. National Anti-Poverty Organization, *Food Bank Survey*, 1984.
31. Hunt, S., "B.C. Food Bank: The Thirties Revisited," *Perception*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1983, p. 11.
32. Hunsley, T. and Hill, K., "A Time for Action," p. 17-18 .
33. Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix*, March 19, 1985.
34. CBC, "Fifth Estate," 26.2.85.
35. Jones, D., "CBC airs benefit for food bank," *Globe and Mail*, May 26, 1985.

IV

BEYOND THE SAFETY NET

With any critique of existing social policies, there comes a point when the issues must be faced and alternative courses of action suggested. As Vaillancourt has noted, social policy and social work academics have an unavoidable date with intervention.[1] Given that the rise of the food banks is concrete evidence of the breakdown of social assistance and unemployment insurance in Canada, what next? What should be the terms of the debate? Are we simply talking about hastening the demise of food banks and reinstituting the old safety net? If not, if we want to move beyond current arrangements, on what basis should we proceed? How do we condemn the shortcomings of the public safety net and yet argue for its development?

Vision: In posing such questions, it is important to recognize a number of points. First, we will have to broaden our horizons and spell out a progressive vision of the future, one which puts ordinary people and their needs before private profits and its demands. In any discussion of alternatives to food banks and the public safety net as we know it today, we have to see such policies within the broader context of a commitment to a reinvigorated welfare state. Indeed, we have to look beyond the current welfare state and ask what kind of society we want to live in: a society controlled by the narrow economic agenda of the private marketeers or one grounded in a commitment to social and economic justice? If we wish to make a strong case for effective social security, we must also recognize its intrinsic relationship with economic justice, full employment and adequate incomes.

Social growth — limits and opportunities: Second, it is essential to recognize both the limits to, and opportunities for, such social growth. As policy-makers and analysts know, no policy is developed in a vacuum. We live in a liberal democracy and a capitalist economy. We must also work from where we are, and in present-day Canada with its commitment to neo-conservative thinking, that is not a very encouraging thought. The prognosis for progressive social policy is not good, whether or not we agree with Claus Offe's view that the welfare state is irreversible. He is probably correct when he argues that neo-conservative governments are not really set on dismantling welfare states, because they understand it as a comparatively efficient conflict-reducing mechanism, and at the same time fear the widespread conflict that dismantling it might produce.[2] Those living in British Columbia might dispute Offe's prognosis.

Moreover, while demographic and technological changes continue to make new demands on the welfare state, the political and economic order governing our lives imposes severe limits on much-needed progressive and structural changes. Nevertheless, if not in the immediate future, we have to maintain a sense of determined optimism about the prospects for change. We need to recall that today's welfare state benefits were won through argument, debate and struggle. In other words, ideas and ideals are not enough. Continued hard work and collective action by women's groups, political parties, churches, anti-poverty organizations, labour groups and native organizations is of critical importance.

Welfare state contradictions: Third, as Offe suggests, we should not forget the complexity and contradictions of the welfare state, and of the safety net which forms part of its policies, services and practices. We need to remind ourselves that Canada's welfare state imposes burdens as well as benefits; that through different states of welfare such as personal tax expenditures, corporate welfare and occupational benefits, some groups and classes benefit much more than others. In fact, in many ways the welfare state seeks to maintain and reproduce existing class relations and divisions. It is therefore divisive and not integrative. It supports inequality. For many, obtaining income support such as social assistance and unemployment insurance is so tied up with demeaning bureaucratic regulations and practices that to describe the support as a benefit is a cruel hoax. It is therefore important that we do not rush to defend a system without being aware that it needs changing. Moreover, we must note that the welfare state has been attacked by the right and the left and that, at some points, their anti-statist critiques appear to converge.

What, then, are the choices open to Canadians if we reject the food bank and the safety net as long term options? In exploring such choices, without any intent to develop a grand design in a few short pages, the concern is to tease out the critical policy choices needed and the courses of action to guide future decisions. To do this, we will first review the findings of this case study of Canada's experience with food banks and the public safety net, and identify significant policy issues and questions. Then we will consider the underlying principles of a number of competing approaches to social policy making in Canada: neo-conservative, corporatist, socialist and feminist, and consider their short and long term implications for Canada's welfare state. Given the particular commitment of this book to see human needs placed ahead of private profits, emphasis will be placed on the last three approaches.

A. *Issues and Questions*

We will consider the policy issues both from the perspective of the rise of the food banks and of the collapse of the safety net, bearing in mind the contradictory functions of the welfare state. The main question is: How do we work through the contradictions?

The collapse of the public safety net:

The major conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the rise of food banks in Canada in the 1980's is concrete evidence of the breakdown of the public safety net. While it may be argued that the net was never properly secured in the first place, it is clear that programmes such as unemployment insurance and provincial social assistance are failing in their official objectives and are inadequate to the task. During a period when the benefits are most needed, the system is unwilling and unable to respond. Mass unemployment and chronic joblessness have blown great holes in Canada's safety net. Hunger once again stalks the land.

Evidence for the collapse of the safety net is overwhelming. Between 1981 and 1984, hundreds of thousands of Canadians in all but two provinces have been turning to food banks for relief. Many of these food bank users are in receipt of substitute incomes such as social assistance or unemployment insurance. Others are on low wages, fixed incomes or have no income at all. Women, children and families are among the major clients of the food banks, and they are also being used by many of the "new poor."

While rapidly escalating unemployment is a primary reason many people must resort to unemployment insurance and social assistance, both programmes have become overburdened. Exploding caseloads, particularly in Western Canada, have resulted in conservative governments applying more stringent eligibility criteria and cutting back benefits. The argument is that governments cannot afford new spending and that existing expenditures must be spread more thinly. What this fails to recognize is that, for many years, the benefits themselves have been inadequate when compared to Canada's most conservative poverty lines.

The inadequacy of benefits is further attested to by the fact that the heaviest demands on the food banks occur towards the end of each month when the "welfare" cheques are running out. The problem is that social assistance or unemployment insurance benefits, even when coupled with supplementary income such as family allowance, child tax credits or OAS-G's benefits, still condemn people to living below the poverty line. The social minimum is no longer adequate, if it ever was. The state wishes to keep benefits low as a means of disciplining labour, so as to ensure wage demands are kept down and low-paying jobs can be created. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the maintenance of poverty is in the best interests of the state.

For many, of course, the safety net functions as a welfare trap. Inadequate benefits make it difficult for people to attain self-sufficiency and to meet their customary and normal roles and social obligations as parents, workers, relatives, friends and school children. Highly regressive social assistance policies regarding overpayments and recoveries lead to further reductions in people's benefits, thereby making it more and more difficult for people to escape the poverty trap. In other words, the benefits people actually receive do not necessarily reflect what they are entitled to. Bureaucratic red tape, insensitive judgments by financial aid workers, and benefit reduction rates which severely limit the amounts people can earn while receiving social assistance, sap people's incentive to work and condemn them to lives of enforced dependency. "Welfare" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In some provinces, to appeal such decisions is hardly worth one's time. The appeal machinery is very much a part of the welfare bureaucracy itself and, if Saskatchewan is any guide, only one person in four is likely to win a local appeal. At the provincial level, this ratio drops to one in ten, hardly an incentive.

As a starting point, though, it is important to defend existing levels of benefits against cutbacks and to proclaim the right of entitlement to adequate benefits. We have seen that provinces do not acknowledge that such a right exists. However, the federal government, through the expressed intent of the Canada Assistance Plan, does accept the notion of adequacy. Furthermore, Canada, and by implication the provinces, recognize through international convention that their citizens have a right to adequate benefit. The federal government, though, has chosen to turn a blind eye to these legitimate claims and, through its constitutional and spending powers, it can be held responsible for the collapse of the safety net. It largely chooses to ignore the cost-sharing conditions under which it pays half the cost of provincial social assistance programmes.

The final piece of evidence which points to the collapse of the public safety net concerns those who have had to resort to standing in food bank line-ups. For them, publicly provided benefits (social assistance or unemployment insurance) quite simply do not exist. Their personal experience tells them this: there is either nothing for them, or too little to be worth the hassle of trying to obtain it, even if support is an established social and legal right.

The central issue raised by the collapse of the safety net is whether it is a system worth defending, and if it is, what can be done to patch it up in the short term and transform it for the future. Inadequate incomes from both paid labour and social benefits are a critical issue.

Hunger — a national emergency:

A second conclusion to be drawn is that hunger in Canada is a national emergency. It is clearly national in scope, given the large numbers of people in all regions of the country who are turning to food banks and other forms of emergency food relief. For them food banks have become a substitute for social assistance. It is also clear that many people who are struggling on without resorting to the food banks are also hungry, inadequately fed and chronically undernourished.

It is an emergency in the sense that the public frontline services have broken down and people have little alternative but charitable relief. Even food banks, though, are turning people away. One major concern expressed by food bank directors and health workers is that expectant mothers and single parents and their children are not getting enough to eat. Evidence for this concern can be seen in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. Child hunger emerges as a particularly troublesome issue and is of scandalous proportions. This particular issue was addressed as long ago as 1973 by the National Council on Welfare.[3]

Furthermore, we must remember that this study of food banks has not addressed the question of rural poverty or of deprivation in northern and remote areas. This situation exists despite the fact that Canada in 1981 was the seventeenth richest country in the world in terms of GNP per capita.[4]

The policy issues spawned by the scale of hunger in Canada are numerous and interrelated. They include inadequate nutrition, family and child poverty, inadequate health care, educational deprivation and profit-making in the corporate food industry. Indeed, in that food banks become extensions of the food industry they help mask the generation of waste.

The breakdown of the social consensus:

Third, the long line-ups and increasing demand for charitable food question strongly the liberal idea of a safety net which would compensate people against the contingencies of unemployment and universal risks resulting from economic and technological change. Economic growth and full employment, the twin pillars upon which the liberal welfare state was constructed, can no longer be counted upon. As Pat Kerans has argued, "the few ingredients we have of a welfare state were finally in place in the mid-sixties, and the pressure to dismantle them began within ten years."[4]

At the same time it is unrealistic to expect that either the Canadian welfare state or a range of social assistance programmes could have solved the problem of poverty. In light of its contradictory functions, in too many ways the welfare state helps to reproduce inequality. Its benefits are inadequate to the task. In other words, joblessness, poverty and the inequitable distribution of wealth still remain critical policy issues in Canada. Food banks have become a constant reminder of those facts.

The rise of voluntarism:

Fourth, food banks are practical examples and powerful symbols of the strength of voluntarism in Canada. There is nothing intrinsically or ethically wrong with volunteering. Indeed, encouraging and strengthening altruism in any society is important. However, concern for the suffering and survival of one's fellow citizens can be expressed in more ways than through private and charitable acts of generosity. Altruism should also infuse public systems of welfare.

Unfortunately, the current emphasis upon voluntarism and privatization legitimates the idea that government social spending is too high, that it is largely responsible for the deficit, and that it should be cut back. Voluntarism and privatized solutions such as food banks are therefore the appropriate way. Attention is deflected from underlying issues. By replacing publicly-financed services and displacing people from jobs, voluntarism tends to erode the tax base. Lost revenue, of course, exacerbates the deficit and encourages further restraint. This self-fulfilling prophecy also increasingly undermines the whole notion of social rights to adequate benefits and full participation in society. Moreover, voluntarism is inadequate to the task of responding to the major economic problems of unemployment and lack of food. The fact that food banks are turning people away is evidence of this.

More fundamentally, they help to recreate the notion of two standards of services: one for the rich who can pay, and another "welfare" standard for those who cannot. Casualty treatment approaches to dealing with poverty are re-emphasized. And, as the food banks illustrate, when the rationing of food to people in need occurs, which it invariably does, the distinctions between the deserving and non-deserving are quickly reintroduced. This time, though, there is no right of appeal, no legally enforceable claim. Private charity, not public government, is in charge. The consumer of this type of voluntary service inevitably loses citizenship.

It would seem, therefore, that the rise of the food banks, the collapse of the safety net and the policy questions thereby raised can only point in one direction. They support the view expressed by the experts who prepared the International Labour Organization international report on social security to the twenty-first century. They state that, "It is beyond doubt that there has been no period since the aftermath of the Second World War when the need for effective social security policies has been greater."[6]

Notes

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3. National Council of Welfare, *One Child, One Choice*, 1973.
4. World Tables, *The Third Edition*, Vol. 1, Economic Data, John Hopkins University Press, 1983, Table 11, p. 560.
5. Kerans, P., "A Sketch of Elements Needed for a Theory of Canadian Social Welfare Policy," in Campbell et al., (eds.), *Unavoidable Dates with Intervention*.
6. International Labour Organization, *Into the twenth-first century*, 1984, p. 18.

B. What Is to Be Done?

If the central issue is developing effective social security policies in Canada in the 1980's and beyond, what is to be done? This question must be approached not only in the short and long term; it also poses a question of analysis. There is a prior need to establish a framework for the debate and draw out the assumptions, theories and principles to make informed choices about which effective social security policies might be made. We need to be aware of the contradictions imbedded in such a choice, but at the same time be clear about the benefits. This is the subject of a book in itself, so this concluding section will only suggest some ways of thinking about such questions.

1. Broadening the debate

The problem at present is that the country's social policy agenda is firmly in the hands of politicians, both federal and provincial, who wish to narrow the debate. As Ternowetsky has argued:

> A major problem in the formulation of the Conservatives' agenda is that it overlooks key elements in its efforts to lower the deficit and create favourable conditions for a private sector led recovery. Unless the framework, in which we are invited to participate, is challenged and broadened, the future course of social policies in the country may undermine many of the gains we have come to accept and take for granted. What may be at stake is the political legitimacy of state welfare . . . .[1]

The neo-conservatism option:

One set of choices currently offered is that of the neo-conservatives. They are continually pushing on the Canadian public a return to the old values of the private market place. Citizens are being asked to attack the deficit, caused in part by profligate social spending; to rely on the private sector to create the necessary economic growth and so lead to the promised land; to hold down wages; to deregulate and limit the controls on multinational corporations; and, to cut back social spending and become more selective in social policy. The values of individualism, competition and inequality are being advocated.

What this means for social policy, and particularly income security and the public safety net, are policies based on screening people out rather than ensuring they receive the support to which they are entitled. The doctrines of minimalism, "less eligibility," selectivity, privatization and voluntarism are touted as the way ahead. Patriarchal ideas about the subservient and service roles of women are assumed. Given that nearly 2 million Canadians are jobless and that chronic unemployment is a growing menace, the inevitable results of such policies are longer "welfare" line-ups, food banks, increasing poverty and growing inequality. Most significantly, full employment is not given the highest social and economic priority, and public attention is diverted from the corporate sector's non-payment of substantial revenues.

The welfare state recipe moreover, seeks to discipline the labour market through holding down benefits. It also emphasizes decentralization and increased involvement of the community in social policy. This anti-statist argument is a well-intentioned and important criticism of public bureaucratic red tape and insensitivity. Indeed, as Resnick has suggested, it is an argument which should be advanced by those on the left.[2] Others, including the authors of the Canadian Association of Social Workers' brief to the Macdonald Commission, make a plea for the democratization and decentralization of bureaucratic structures of the welfare state.[3]

There is a strong case to be made for ensuring stronger local participation, through locally elected representatives, in personal social service development and administration in Canada. However, the idea of applying this system to income support programmes should be treated with extreme caution. First, one might ask why private bureaucracies would be any less ensnared by red tape than their public counterparts. Second, we should note the warning of Calmain in his critique of the CASW brief to the Macdonald Commission. He wrote:

> It is not altogether clear how this "democratized" administration would work to the hoped for ends. Anyone familiar with Dickens or

> able to recall our Great Depression of the 1930's is aware that local administration is no sure route to humane administrative measures nor to political support for a welfare state. Such decentralized local administration as I am aware of has not been free of arbitrariness or rigidities.[4]

In other words, even when the neo-conservative argument is acknowledged to have some legitimacy, it is open to serious weakness. Most significantly, of course, if such policies are pursued, they would result in perpetuation of a casualty treatment approach to social security and would amount to a serious erosion, if not dismantling, of people's rights to assistance.

Internationally respected academics and critics of the left and centre-left, such as Claus Offe, Peter Townsend, Michael Harrington, Lester Thurow and Ramesh Mishra, all argue that neo-conservatist recipes for dismantling the welfare state cannot work.[5] They are simply not feasible. Laissez-faire can no longer be the way ahead.

While these conclusions might be expected, given these critics' socialist and social democratic views, they are borne out by the opinions expressed by the ILO international expert working group in its 1984 report on the objectives for social security in the year 2000. The group was composed of academics and public administrators from France, the United Kingdom, Poland, United States, Canada, Portugal, Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand. They asked whether the greater affluence of today's industrial economy justifies dismantling social security. More specifically, they asked, "In a richer society, should individuals be left to make their own arrangements? Can the role of compulsory social security be reduced as societies become more affluent?"[6] Their conclusion was quite straightforward. "All of the arguments point in the opposite direction."[7]

They cited four reasons why social security had to be strengthened and not cut back. Growing affluence has produced further insecurities because of redundant skills and has been accompanied by a greater rate of marriage breakdown. The private market cannot provide insurance against unemployment, long term health and social care costs, the economic consequences of marriage breakup or of large families. Pension and health insurance costs are also rising. Higher income groups tend to have supplementary private insurance, and cutting state schemes would adversely affect middle and lower income groups. If we therefore reject neo-conservative thinking on appropriate philosophical and practical solutions to these conditions, what alternative prescriptions are there?

The corporatist agenda:

A second set of options are those which recognize the importance of maintaining the welfare state but advocate restructuring it along corporatist lines. Essentially, it is argued that neither the private market nor a welfare state "associated with bureaucracy, centralization, regulation and control"[9] is the way ahead. This view is increasingly espoused by social democrats, and the models most often referred to are those found in Sweden and Austria and other European countries. As Mishra states, ". . . corporatism provides an institutional framework for sustaining full employment and comprehensive social services in the context of a liberal market society."[10]

In Canada, the intent would be to achieve a national consensus or social contract. Allan Blakeney, the former NDP premier of Saskatchewan and the current leader of the opposition, expressed the objective as to ". . . reach a rough consensus among government, business, labour and consumers of how best to get our economy growing again, and how best to share the new wealth."[11]

He argues that it is possible to have both full employment and low inflation and that a number of European countries as well as Australia have been successful in this. The key is to make sure that governments, labour, business and the general public reach agreements over how the growth is to occur and how it is to be shared. Corporatist structures reflecting these various mechanisms at the federal and provincial levels would be developed to ensure the representation and participation of key interest groups. For such proposals to work in Canada both management and labour would have to regard full employment as a necessary condition for both social and economic development. Equally, there would be firm commitments to adequate incomes, industrial democracy and job satisfaction.

As far as social programmes are concerned, a corporatist approach would mean looking at bipartite and tripartite management of social services. It would also mean ensuring that voluntary organizations and associations of employers and employees become vehicles for the administration of social benefits.[12] Unions would also be involved.

While there is much merit in these proposals, given their commitment to sustaining and developing the welfare state and recognizing the importance of the relationship between full employment and social security, we should question the values and policy principles which they reflect as well as the feasibility of such proposals.

What guarantees are there, for example, that corporatist management bodies, with a vested interest in maintaining their own job security and competitive positions, will be able and willing to address the adequacy of social benefits for the unemployed? This is a significant question given the "less than subsistence" welfare rates now paid in Canada. In other words, how will those with no economic power be represented in the councils of the corporatist welfare state? Is it democratization that is needed in this instance, or an established social right to an adequate level of benefit?

If full employment cannot be guaranteed, how will those on welfare be treated? Will benefit rates still be seen as an important way to discipline labour, or will they be treated as an important component of a guaranteed social wage for all? Moreover, in the context of a federal state as culturally, geographically and constitutionally complex as Canada, how feasible are corporatist policies and structures? Will they work in a society where competitive individualism is the dominant ideology?

We also have to ask whether such an approach will lead to guarantees of security,[13] or whether because of its emphasis on particular administrative mechanisms, its adoption in Canada would be another example of tinkering with the system without addressing the need for fundamental reform.

Do those who advocate such approaches acknowledge, in the words of the ILO report, that the aims of social security must be wider than the prevention or relief of poverty?[14] Social security

> . . . is the response to an aspiration for security in its widest sense. Its fundamental purpose is to give individuals and families the confidence that their level of living and quality of life will not, in so far as is possible, be greatly eroded by any social or economic eventuality. This involves not just meeting needs as and when they arise but also preventing risks from arising in the first place, and helping individuals and families to make the best possible adjustment when faced with disabilities and disadvantages which have not been or could not be prevented.[15]

Such approaches do perhaps represent the best that can be done given the liberal democratic nature of Canada's political economy and its range of welfare state policies and services. The question for the social democrats is whether they can convince the Canadian public that welfare state corporatism is preferable to the conservatism of Mulroney and Bennett.

Democratic socialist choices:

What principles of policy might we expect if we adopt democratic socialist perspectives? Certainly, the values they espouse would broaden the terms of the debate about the safety net still further. Essentially, if we follow the advice of Townsend, we will see a preventive and creative role for social policy[16] and not one which sees the welfare state and social security as somehow marginal and residual to economic policy. The casualty treatment model of food banks and minimal public relief will be rejected.

If poverty is a key issue which the welfare state and the public safety net have failed to resolve, it is because the institutional and structural causes of the problem have either not been recognized or else have been ignored. Townsend shows how poverty in developed industrial western countries is partly a function of the global economy, of the role played by international institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) and multinational corporations, and of demographic forces. He makes the telling point that the high standards of living achieved in these countries have been at the expense of Third World nations.

Clearly poverty in Canada is no exception. It is created and reproduced by the capitalist economic system governing the creation and distribution of wealth.[17] This system has a crucial impact upon the culture and lifestyles of all of us and must be confronted if poverty and inequality are to be addressed.

In other words, if we do want to abolish poverty, then the policies employed must be based on more than simply securing the welfare state or the public safety net in their current forms. Indeed, the welfare state with its array of social welfare services has so far proved unequal to the task. And as Townsend reminds us, this is because it essentially employs a casualty treatment approach to individual breakdown and does little to alter the status quo. In fact, it helps to perpetuate it. Inequality is supported and maintained by the welfare state.

What is required instead is a firm commitment to prevention, to a developmental approach, to equality of rights for men and women, to democratization and participation. In particular, we need to search for new forms of social legitimacy. The traditional and accepted measure of a person's social status is having a job, preferably a well-paid one. This is a person's or family's ticket to the trough. Low wages, chronic unemployment and poverty deny full citizenship rights to millions of Canadians. To grasp the dimensions of this problem we must understand that economic and social policies are inseparable.

Furthermore, we must not forget that risks are universal, that interdependence is the key to human survival and development, and that citizens' rights, as citizens, to live their lives to the full is inviolable. Human needs have to be recognized before those of profit. Economic as well as social rights must be guaranteed. Economic right means the right to adequate incomes from paid employment and cash benefits for those not in the paid labour force. Above all else, as the Catholic Bishops and representatives of the United Church have reminded us, the moral and political nature of the crisis must be addressed.

As far as the public safety net is concerned, a key assumption is that policies to alleviate or eradicate poverty must no longer see it simply in terms of people's physical needs. Their social needs, roles and obligations must be recognized. If people are in poverty, their capacity to participate in the customary activities of society and fulfill their social roles and obligations of parent, worker, relative or friend are seriously undermined. Not only are their lives and those of their dependents diminished, but society also loses valuable human resources.

Looking at poverty in this way has, of course, many implications, not only for unemployment insurance, social assistance benefits and other safety net substitute incomes, but also for those trying to live on low wages. The crucial point about moving beyond the safety net is that as a society we will have to confront our assumptions about why people are or become poor. Policies flowing from a "relative deprivation" understanding of poverty must be implemented.

If we remain convinced that poverty results largely from individual defect, or even personal misfortune, then the current array of mean, punitive and inadequate subsistence programmes will continue. If, however, we see more clearly its structural and institutional causes, then we might begin to find the tools to combat it. This process would involve spending more time examining the wealthy and how they retain their power and use poverty to preserve their own positions and the status quo. If we wish to support the Canadian Catholic Bishops' commitment to the preferential option for the poor and to the dignity of labour, then there is more to the task than simply patching up the safety net by resorting to food banks. Studying the wealthy, as Ternowetsky suggests, and asking what contribution they make to the just society is a good place to start.

Feminist perspectives:

Feminist critiques of social welfare also tell us as much and more. They remind us that the major consumers and providers of state welfare are women. More specifically, feminists are concerned, Elizabeth Wilson tells us, ". . . because social policies and welfare provision fail to sustain emotionally satisfying relationships either inside or outside the family; they fail to provide nurturance and care, but rely on a largely non-existent notion of an extended family network for the care of dependents."[18]

Women, Wilson argues, are not averse to playing caring roles in society, but they do not see why they should do so without adequate income support nor do they see why men should not also fulfill domestic and caring roles. In other words, state benefits are of vital importance to women; their inadequacy and the demeaning regulations which govern their receipt have critical and oppressive consequences for women and the family.

Clearly, any developments in the welfare state must lead to the further liberation of women and not to their continued oppression at home or in the workplace. They must also take account of the subjective and qualitative experiences of women on welfare who know better than most what it is like to be on the receiving end of social assistance and food bank hampers. If welfare state policies and services continue to promote patriarchal attitudes and practices, they will continue to be resisted.

2. From principles to policies

There is little reason to be optimistic in the short term about repairing the damage to Canada's safety net. Those in power are more concerned with cutting than spending and, in any event, see no particular problem in relying upon the churches, NGO's and the private sector to feed hungry Canadians. Adequate social assistance benefits and decent wages (if current minimum wage rates are any guide) are not high on their list of priorities.

In the longer term, by the year 2000, progressive and structural changes might stand some chance of capturing public attention. Such a prospect is, of course, difficult to predict. But if unemployment remains entrenched, bread lines lengthen, social unrest gathers pace and progressive forces of the centre and left work together, then political attention might turn to policies which more fully recognize the social needs and citizenship rights of those dependent upon substitute incomes. It must also be remembered that Canada is a federal state, and the constitutional division of power regarding social welfare adds to the complexity of mandates. Perhaps we should take note of what Harrington says about social reform movements in the U.S: it is important for labour, the poor and the middle class to work together on these issues.[19]

Defending what we have:

In the meantime, it is clear from this analysis of the rise of the food banks and the collapse of Canada's public safety net that, despite the contradictory functions of the welfare state, it is essential to defend the gains and benefits made so far. It is also important to move progressively beyond current social arrangements. This will no doubt be difficult, particularly when economic growth is highly volatile and unemployment refuses to succumb to the promptings of the private sector.

It is clear that neo-conservative thinking has little to offer. The retreat to the private market, or the compromise with the captains of industry on matters of public welfare, will not lead to the social security which is everyone's right. The Mulroney government's approach to the social safety net is more concerned with tinkering than with fundamental reform. Of course, this may be just as well, as the Conservative government's idea of basic change may further set the clock back, particularly if its intent is to dismantle universal programmes such as family allowances.

When we translate the socialist values of freedom, equality and fellowship and their related values of democracy and humanitarianism into principles of social policy the way ahead can be seen. The critical and developmental principles of social security needed are prevention, participation and full acknowledgement of the equal citizenship rights of men, women and children. How could these be applied in practice? What could this mean for the public safety net?

As noted earlier, CAP has recently been reviewed by Deputy Prime Minister Erick Nielsen as part of his spending review. The Nielsen Report, while avoiding the whole issue of the inadequacy of social assistance benefits rightly points to unemployment as a critical problem which creates caseload strains on the public safety net and an intolerable cost level. His answer is to reduce caseloads (thereby saving federal dollars) and to promote job creation, job searches and job acceptances for "employable" welfare clients. He looks to provincial experiments in Newfoundland, P.E.I. and Saskatchewan while noting that their long term effectiveness is not clear. This latter point is important as the current emphasis on short term "work for welfare" job creation programmes could create more harm than benefit. People raise their expectations only to be recycled back to unemployment insurance or social assistance. Clients are forced to choose between accepting jobs and training or being cut off their benefits. Wages remain low. The doctrine of less eligibility prevails and benefits continue to remain inadequate.

Most significantly, when evaluating the Nielsen recommendations, it is important to remember that the bottom line emphasis is on cutting costs, screening people out and leaving the problem to the private market. There is also the danger, according to Shifrin, that cost-sharing of provincial social assistance programmes might be dumped in favour of block funding.[20] The inevitable consequence would be the balkanization of provincial welfare programmes and the further erosion of social rights. The ability of the federal government to promote and defend the national standards would be eclipsed.

Full employment and an adequate social wage:

Instead, the Nielsen Committee should have considered that the current breakdown of unemployment insurance and social assistance in Canada is a powerful comment on the lack of preventive and developmental policies and programmes. If these principles were to be fully implemented, we would see a commitment to full employment with the right to a job at an adequate wage, long term job creation in the public and private sectors, comprehensive social security, the right to adequate income support for those not in the paid labour force, and a full-scale commitment to universal post-secondary education and training. This programme would, of course, necessitate stronger, not diminished, government intervention. In particular it would demand a strong federal presence. The federal government would defend CAP and enforce the cost-sharing conditions.

If we take the current example of inadequate substitute incomes it is critically important that the federal government provide an operational definition of adequacy. This issue has surfaced time and again in 1970's and 1980's studies of the food banks and of Canadian poverty. It is always the key issue raised but always fails to be addressed. In fact, if the issue of hunger and chronic malnourishment, especially among children, is to be addressed, the federal government must act at once. Perhaps its own Health and Welfare Canada officials together with their provincial counterparts, should start by jointly acknowledging the problem.

At the same time, the definition of adequacy must not simply relate to the physical needs of people but must also take into account their social roles and obligations. In other words, following Townsend, existing poverty lines would be redefined as "community participation" lines and the standards would be applied in an integrated way to the full range of federal and provincial benefits. This idea could be further advanced if the existing CCSD poverty lines were adopted as the basis for calculating provincial social welfare rates. They should be reinterpreted as standards for community participation.

Guaranteed annual income and new forms of social legitimacy:

Another approach would be to resurrect the old idea of the guaranteed annual income (GAI), which would ensure people's active participation in the community. If it was applied universally and income from work was seen as additional, it would be an important step in ensuring people's freedom to develop their individual talents and discharge their social responsibilities in a secure environment.

The GAI would help address the plight of the chronically unemployed and those excluded from the conventionally-defined labour force. Society would need to realize that there are more ways of being a socially legitimate and fully participating citizen than simply holding down a traditionally defined job. We would need to reexamine notions of the work ethic and ideas about what consitutes legitimate work. As these ideas change, so more tickets to the trough would open up. Paid housework and child care, full living and tuition grants for students, adequate benefits and pensions for seniors, and financial recognition of volunteerism, could all help us move to a more fully participatory, and thereby fully employed, society.

One way of moving towards this objective would be to review the total array of income security benefits and minimum wage earnings in Canada from the perspective of prevention. How adequate are such benefits and earnings in ensuring a minimum base for active community participation and family roles and obligations? A preventative approach is preferable to the current tinkering with family allowances, child tax credits and exemptions. It should be pointed out that the idea of a Guaranteed Annual Income has been on the social security agenda in Canada for a number of years and is promoted by such bodies as the Canadian Council on Social Development and the United Church of Canada.

More recently, of course, the Macdonald Commission Report (1985) has reintroduced the idea of a Universal Income Security Programme (UISP) or guaranteed annual income. This proposal is linked with others designed to get Canadians back into the labour force. While this should be acknowledged, the benefits from Macdonald's UISP proposal fail to address the question of adequacy and, if adopted, will ensure the continuation of poverty. Macdonald's message to Canadians appears to be "work at any price." It is not a hopeful message for the future for those on low wages or out of work.[21] He avoids the topic of social legitimacy. One thing is for sure: the proclamation of the Charter of Rights equality clause, Section 15 is likely to result in a number of cases which challenge the discriminatory provisions of social security legislation in Canada. The question of inadequate benefits will be featured as a key issue.

There can be little doubt that in the years ahead we will have as much need for a public safety net as we do today. In fact, if current economic and social policies are pursued, the need will grow. One challenge, then, is to build on what we have: provisions in the Charter of Rights, international covenants, human rights legislation and acts of Parliament and provincial legislatures that speak of people's rights to be treated equally and receive adequate benefits.

On a broader front, other priorities, such as those approved by the 30th General Council of the United Church of Canada, should be given careful consideration. They include not only increased minimum social assistance rates and a guaranteed annual income for all Canadians, but in addition:

- a national programme for full employment,
- reform of the income tax system,
- reduction of interest rates, and
- more effective guarantees from corporations against sudden closures.[22]

The United Church, like the Catholic Bishops in their commitment to a preferential option for the poor and the dignity of labour, emphasize the moral and political nature of the crisis.[23] Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that many of these two churches' concepts embody the principles of socialist planning with its emphasis on prevention, participation and equality of rights. A strong commitment to a moral economy and the inseparability of social and economic planning runs through their statements.

The People's Food Commission in 1980[24] and the People's Report sponsored by the Solidarity Coalition in B.C.[25] in 1984-85 drew similar conclusions: people before profits. In fact, if economic and social justice is to be achieved, the right of all adult Canadians to useful, productive and fulfilling paid employment at decent wages (or self-employment) must be guaranteed. Furthermore, all Canadians unable to work for pay must have the right to an adequate standard of living that rises with increases in the wealth and productivity of the society. Legislation proclaiming such rights has recently been introduced for debate into the U.S. Congress under the *Income and Jobs Action Act* of 1985.[26] While U.S. food banks should hardly be emulated in Canada, this full employment legislation should be pursued at full speed.

At the same time that universal employment, adequate incomes and policies for low income Canadians are being promoted, it would also be necessary to look at the lifestyles of the rich. Revenue generation is as critical a policy question as economic and social investment. It would be important to consider sources of revenue such as corporate tax and hidden tax expenditures. The relationship between profitability and employment must be examined. Not only should we consider minimum but adequate incomes for the poor, but maximum incomes for the rich and secure.

Utopian, impractical, naive! After all, this is Canada, which exists cheek by jowl with the United States of America, heartland of international capitalism. Maybe so, but it is important to recognize that if we are committed to creating and sharing our wealth, as well as considering our relations with the Third World, sooner or later we must implement these principles.

Although the way ahead is difficult to foresee, one message is very clear. While the food banks of the 1980's reflect a significant altruistic concern for the hungry and unemployed, they are at the same time a major indictment of morally indefensible economic policies and a system of social security unequal to the task of protecting vulnerable people. This conclusion should be of little surprise given that the critical function of the minimalism doctrine underlying the public safety net is to discipline labour. Our task, then, is not to resurrect the safety net in its old form, but to move beyond it.

In doing this, however, we must remember that the gains and benefits of Canada's welfare state were won through great struggle by many progressive people and organizations, including women, labour, churches, political parties and native peoples. Rights to social, economic and cultural security which have formed the rhetoric, if not the reality, of the welfare state must be staunchly defended and used as a platform for further progress.

The goal must be nothing less than the full participation of all Canadians in their society. This means a commitment to a policy of full employment. All Canadians must have the right to work; the right to jobs paying decent wages in satisfying work environments and, if they are not in the conventionally defined paid labour force, the right to adequate substitute incomes. We owe those standing in the breadlines nothing less.

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Graham Riches is Professor of Social Work and Director of the Social Administration Research Unit at the University of Regina where he teaches social policy. He holds an M.A. from Cambridge University and a postgraduate Diploma in Social Administration from the London School of Economics. Before coming to Canada in 1974 he practised community development in southeast Asia, London and Liverpool, and taught at the University of Hong Kong. He is co-author of *Spending is Choosing: Restraint and Growth in Saskatchewan's Personal Social Services 1966-77* and has published numerous articles on poverty and related social welfare issues. He is co-founder and joint editor of the *Canadian Review of Social Policy*.

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